

AMBASSADOR MARIE THERESE HUHTALA

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Somebody will ask so I'll ask right now, where does Huhtala come from?

HUHTALA: It's a Finnish name. It's my husband's name. His grandfather on his father's side emigrated from Finland about 100 years ago.

Q: Where did they settle?

HUHTALA: They settled first in Utah and then California. My husband's mother is sixth-generation native Californian, which is rather unusual. Her family members were among the original settlers of northern California.

Q: Well we'll come to that. When and where were you born?

HUHTALA: I was born in Los Angeles in 1949. My own parents had each emigrated from the Midwest. Dad was originally from Minnesota and Mom was from Kansas. I was lucky to have a very close, very loving family.

Q: What was your maiden name?

HUHTALA: Mackey.

Q: Let's talk about the Mackey side of the family. What do you know about them?

HUHTALA: My Dad's family came from Ireland, I think it was sometime in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and settled in Minnesota. I know that his grandfather was a minstrel singer. He was famous in those circles. His last name was Barron and they called him Singer Barron. His wife, whom we called her Nana, actually lived to see me. I was the oldest great-grandchild, the only one that she ever got to see.

Q: What did your father, he left, was he in the Midwest, born there?

HUHTALA: When he was fifteen he left home. He accompanied his aunt and uncle, who were coming out to California looking for a good job. That would have been around 1942. Dad was kind of rootless because his mother had divorced a couple of times and he didn't feel any strong ties there. So he came with his aunt and uncle who were like another set of parents to him. They went to the Los Angeles area, where Dad attended Redondo High.

Q: What did your aunt and uncle do? What were they doing, do you know?

HUHTALA: I don't know. I remember them well. They were very kind people. I think my great-uncle had a series of different jobs.

Q: On your mother's side?

HUHTALA: My mother's family moved out from Kansas, I think it was probably in the late 1930s, to California. Her Dad was an engineer of some sort, or an engineer/scientist. I was told he had some involvement in the development of radar, though that may have been overstated. My grandmother was a nurse, a fairly independent woman for the time. Mom essentially grew up in the Los Angeles area. Mom went to UCLA (University of California in Los Angeles) and met my Dad at the campus Newman Society, a club for Catholic young people to get together. Mom is two years older than Dad. While she was in college, he was already working. They married as soon as she finished college.

Q: What was your mother studying?

HUHTALA: They had a general liberal arts major at that time and that's what Mom was taking. She took a lot of art courses; she was very interested in art. She also took French. Near the end, she allowed herself to get so wrapped up in the planning of her wedding that she had to take an incomplete in one of her courses and didn't actually get her degree. She went back to school much later, about the age of 50, and got her bachelors' degree then. It was important to her.

Q: Now your father, what was he doing?

HUHTALA: He had a series of jobs. He worked as a bank teller. He sold fine silverware from door to door. Eventually he learned the trade or the craft of being a tool and die maker. He had some kind of training for that. From my earliest memories he was always involved in tool and die making for various aircraft companies.

Q: Oh yes that was a real center of aircraft manufacture.

HUHTALA: It was very big down there in the '50s.

Q: What part of Los Angeles did you grow up in?

HUHTALA: We moved around a fair bit. By the time I was in grammar school we had settled in the San Gabriel Valley in a little town called La Puente. Later on when I learned Spanish I learned that the town name means "the bridge" and grammatically, it should be called El Puente. The Anglos called it La Puente, which was kind of a sore point for the local Hispanics. We kids attended a Catholic grammar school named for St. Louis of France and stayed there until I finished eighth grade. Then my parents decided to move up to northern California, to Sacramento. Dad had a good job working for a company that was supplying parts to Aerojet in Sacramento. That fall, around the time when President Kennedy was killed in 1963, Aerojet lost a big government contract and so Dad's company, which produced parts for that contract, had to let my Dad go. For the rest of that year it was very tough for us. Dad was working for Caterpillar in San Leandro (in the San Francisco Bay area), while we finished out the school year in Sacramento. He would drive back and forth to see us on weekends. As soon as school ended we all moved to San Jose. We were all relieved to be reunited. Our family had four kids (I am the oldest) and all of us missed Dad.

Q: Let's go back to the feminine bridge, masculine town of La Puente. What was it like for a kid?

HUHTALA: Well it was one of those new bedroom communities that were springing up in the '50s. It was considered to be well outside of Los Angeles at the time, with pretty streets and nice little tract houses, an area safe enough to ride your bicycle around. I went to the school attached to our church. We were usually driven to and from school but I was able to ride my bike or walk to it if I wanted to, it was that close.

Q: How did you find school? Tell me about the elementary school.

HUHTALA: I loved learning. I was an outstanding student but had occasional problems on the social side. I went out for several sports teams (volleyball and basketball) but I was not very athletic so they would put me on the B team as a substitute! (That meant I never got to play in any intramural games, though I did practice diligently with the team). I have had asthma all my life and at that time it was not well controlled, which put a real limit on what I could do. (Now they have such wonderful medicines it doesn't interfere with my daily activities at all.)

Q: How Catholic was your family would you say?

HUHTALA: Both sides, born and raised.

Q: Born and raised, but there are Catholics and Catholics. Some are sort of well once in the while the father goes to church on Easter and Christmas or something. Was this a fairly orthodox may be the wrong term, but a catholic family?

HUHTALA: Pretty mainstream Catholic. We all went to church every Sunday. If any of the kids misbehaved in church we got punished by our Dad. He was the Head Usher for a while there. I wouldn't say that we were overly devout - I don't think we were afflicted with religiosity or anything - but we were a pretty solid mainstream family. Mom had four babies in five years so I think she and Dad were pretty Catholic!

Q: I was talking to somebody the other day who came from a Catholic family. The mother had something like nine children and the priest use to say, "Well, God will take care of this." But after the ninth she said, "I'm going to start taking care of this."The elementary school, was it run by nuns?

HUHTALA: Yes, they were Irish Sisters, fresh off the boat from Ireland. I realize now that they were missionaries come to convert us in California. They were very strict. They had Irish accents. They had very set ways about them and we had to pretty much shape up. All the old stories you hear about nuns in the classroom are pretty much what we lived with.

Q: Did you get whacked on your hand?

HUHTALA: Yes, they used the ruler if they needed to. Didn't happen to me as I recall, but yeah, it happened to some.

Q: Were you much of a reader?

HUHTALA: Oh yes, I adored reading.

Q: Do you remember as a kid what was some of the earliest books you particularly liked?

HUHTALA: The Dr. Doolittle book, all the Bobbsey Twins and then the Nancy Drews.

Q: I have to say that if there is one unified thing of the women who went into the Foreign Service I'm sure it's everywhere else, the Nancy Drew books.

HUHTALA: They were so empowering. They were wonderful. I use to get together with my girlfriend and we'd pretend that we were Nancy Drew. We were solving mysteries. I also read all the Louisa May Alcott books, which my Mom had from her childhood, and I read the Hardy Boys books that my Dad had. So many times I would just go to the library and just load up, especially in the summer time. I'd get as many books as I could carry. I'd read them all that week and go back the next week and get more.

Q: Were the families in this La Puente, at the school would you say they all more or less came out of the same social draw or ethnic draw or something like that?

HUHTALA: There was a fair amount of ethnic mixing. In southern California, we had a fair number of Hispanic families, though we didn't call them that at the time, we called them Latinos or Chicanos. We had a family from Germany whose daughter was my classmate, a few African Americans, but not very many in that area at the time. All came from the same economic level, which I would now categorize as sort of lower middle class. Nobody was very wealthy, all were people who were working hard.

Q: You were how old when you left there and went up to?

HUHTALA: When I was 14 we moved to Sacramento.

Q: When you got to Sacramento where did you go to school?

HUHTALA: I went to a Catholic girl's school. It was called Our Lady of Loreto, I believe. What I remember about it was it was very tony. The girls were from a considerably higher social/economic level than what I had come out of. The uniforms were very expensive and we had to have two or three of them (one for everyday classes, one for formal occasions, etc.). As I said, my Dad had changed jobs and then he lost his job so it was a lean year for us economically. Mom actually made one of my required outfits. Besides your blazer and skirt and your sweater and skirt, which were wool, you had to have a white party dress, so she made that for me. I wore a white blouse that she had made for me under my blazer until one of the Sisters pulled me aside and said it was the wrong blouse, it had the wrong collar. It had to have a pointed collar, not a round collar. Having to go home and tell my Mom that was tough. We ended up going and buying one "correct" blouse and washing it three or four times a week so I could stay in the damn uniform. Those sisters were not very compassionate about things like that. They weren't very attuned to the facts. Along with the uniform you had to have a beret, and both dress shoes and regular shoes. There was a lot that went with it. It was a different experience. Still, I liked the school. I made some good friends there and it was kind of tough for me to have to move again after one year.

Q: Did you find the education you'd gotten before, how did it serve you when you got up to this tonier school?

HUHTALA: Very well. I was well prepared. Those nuns could teach a good solid program. When I got to this high school I took Latin, algebra, English, science, and history, no problem. I was able to just scoot right in. I got to sing in the glee club, which was lovely. I've always enjoyed singing. I'd been in church choirs in grammar school. So I tried out for this glee club and got to be a member of it. There were really a lot of positive things about that year. A big highlight was that the glee club got to sing the choral parts for the senior class play, Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado; that was really fun.

Q: At a school like this you say it had sort of a party thing, what sort of social life did they have?

HUHTALA: Well for freshmen there wasn't a real well-developed social life but I did make some friends and we'd go over to each others' houses. For dances or mixers there was always the boy's school down the road. I think I may have gone to one of those. I have a real dim memory of being fixed up by somebody, somebody's brother or something, I don't remember.

Q: I was wondering whether, this interesting thing about the times, was there the feeling that if you're Catholic you'd better date Catholic or go out with Catholic boys?

HUHTALA: That was just a given. You didn't even think about that. What was more of an issue was that you were in an all girls' school and you didn't have to have that pressure of dating. It was nice not to have to worry about it. I think a lot of us were very underdeveloped socially.

Q: I think this has been shown to be particularly important. Now we've gone through this great mixing period and now I think we're coming back and saying, wait a minute and particularly for woman or girls the feeling that the guys would sort of dominate the class. I've heard that and this cut out that nonsense.

HUHTALA: The way I would describe it is that it would have been very distracting to have boys around. If they are not around a whole different hierarchy emerges among the girls and you're not as self conscious about your brains. I felt a little bit of that in grammar school too, because during the last two years I was clearly the smartest girl in the class and I think I lost some friends because of it. These tensions were beginning to emerge at that point.

Q: Did you find yourself sort of submerged in this or trying to bite your tongue or something or were you just a smarty pants?

HUHTALA: No, no, I don't think I was ever a smarty pants. In our grammar school, our teachers were old school. I remember one time they said, "All right class, who is the smartest girl in the class? Everybody point to her. And who is the smartest boy in the class? All of you should be like Marie and so and so." That was mortifying. I was 12, 13 years old, and I just wanted to die. It didn't do anything for my popularity. Once I got into the girls' school in Sacramento that sort of thing wasn't an issue at all. It was great.

Q: Where did you go in the north when you left Sacramento ?

HUHTALA: After Sacramento we moved to San Jose.

Q: San Jose, so really you went south.

HUHTALA: Sort of southwest. For my sophomore year I went to a public school, Willow Glen High. As I say money was tight and my younger brothers and sister were in Catholic grammar school, which charged tuition. Our neighborhood had a well-regarded public school so I went there for my sophomore year.

Q: How did you find that?

HUHTALA: It was very hard. I was 15 years old and I'd never been in a public school before. I didn't know anybody. The rules were all different. We didn't wear a uniform so I felt I didn't have enough clothes. 15-year-old girls really worry about clothes.

Q: I have 6 grandchildren, boys. Oh, God it's a difficult period.

HUHTALA: Those kids there had known each other all through school so they had their cliques and their sets very well established. There wasn't a lot of room for a new person to come in. Also it was kind of an adjustment academically because the counsellors there didn't believe I could carry the kind of college prep load that I had been carrying. So I asked to take geometry, biology, a foreign language, history, English and the required course in civics/drivers ed, etc. To me that was a normal load. The counsellor reacted in horror and said, "Well OK, but we won't put you in honors' English; you need to throttle back here and there." That was kind of a waste of time for me.

Q: Why that, they just didn't?

HUHTALA: They didn't have too many kids taking six "solids," as they called them. They were afraid that I would be burned out and I couldn't handle it. I was just a kid and I don't know enough at that point to assert myself. They didn't offer Latin so I took German that year which was fun, I loved it. I did make a couple of friends but it took a while and it was a tough year. Eventually I was getting my feet on the ground in spring of that year and feeling better about it all. I did something on the school play, maybe it was a support function, I don't remember exactly. But my mother had been lying awake at night unable to sleep because I was not in a Catholic school, and she found a way for me to go to Catholic school for my junior and senior years. That made a total of three high schools for me.

Q: That's such a crucial period of time to. What junior and senior year?

HUHTALA: Junior and senior year I went to a school call Notre Dame High School, in San Jose, which was wonderful. It was just what I needed. It was not pretentious like the school in Sacramento. The Sisters there were very, very kind.

Q: Who was running it?

HUHTALA: The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. It's a very nice order. They were mostly American-born. They kept a whole room full of used uniforms that you could get for half price and a lot of people used them, I wasn't the only one. I found out years later that my Dad did handyman jobs around the Sisters' residence to pay for part of the tuition. They never made a point of this. Nobody knew this, I didn't know it, my classmates didn't know it, I was just one of the regular students. And once again, the boys were in a separate school, miles away. We didn't have to think about them all day long. It was just wonderful. I did a lot of healing in those two years.

Q: Again what sort of subjects?

HUHTALA: I took full college prep again. This time it was French I (there was no German offered), Latin II, chemistry. The one thing I did that was different from the normal college-prep program was I took typing, gaining a very useful skill. That meant that I never took psychics in high school and I took my algebra II in summer school, but that was fine with me. Looking back I'm so happy I took that typing. I learned the full touch-key method and how to prepare business letters, all of which was very useful later on.

Q: Where did your family fall politically? Did it fall anywhere politically?

HUHTALA: Oh yes. My parents had started out as Democrats but by '64 they were Goldwater Republicans. We had a lot of noisy fights over the dinner table about the Vietnam War because I was trending liberal (still am!). At that time, in the 1960's, there was all this upheaval going on. This war was looking crazier and crazier, certainly in my eyes. But Dad was becoming more conservative, and he definitely continued in that vein. Mom didn't like to have a lot of conflict and would pretty much vote the way her husband voted. So it was between me and Dad, really. I would get so outraged at him sometimes because when we were discussing politics he would say, "Well, you're just a kid what do you know?" "Well excuse me, Dad, I'm going to be a voter in a few years, you know." The tensions went on a long time and we still don't talk about politics very often now. At least now that we are all so much older we can talk about these things calmly, with the understanding that we are coming at them from different points of view.

Q: And you know when to back off.

HUHTALA: Yes, exactly, but a kid doesn't know that. We had some really interesting blow-ups.

Q: Let's take when you were in high school, how much did the outer world intrude or did it?

HUHTALA: A fair amount because it was the age of protest. Folk music was a really big deal. We were very socially conscious. We knew about Biafra. We knew about the war. The church was going through a real renaissance in the aftermath of Vatican II; Pope John XXIII had only reigned for a few years but he really changed the orientation dramatically. We were having folk masses. We had Mass on the beach after a retreat. These things were very, very meaningful to us and I remember getting a real sense of participation and engagement. All of the girls in our school felt this way and the Sisters encouraged it. It was a real time of commitment to issues and things.

Q: Did you feel, this is the beginning of other changes, woman's role. Were you beginning to feel this? Were you looking ahead? It was pretty hard to have good role models, maybe there were a few, but what about this?

HUHTALA: I had my epiphany on women's liberation a few years later. What was happening then was I was developing a very strong identity as an academic achiever, as an intelligent woman, thinking for myself, getting ready to go to college. I would be the first person in my family to graduate from college and all the while I was assuming, in the back of my mind, that I would also want to marry and have children. I was not yet at the point of realizing that there's a potential contradiction there, and I had not yet had my "consciousness raised." That came a little bit later for me, not in high school.

Q: While you were in high school I take it, maybe even in elementary grades, you knew you were going to go to college.

HUHTALA: Actually the first time I ever thought about it I was about maybe sixth grade, when one of our nuns took several of us aside and said, "You all should prepare for college because you have it in you to go to college." I'd never thought about it before. I was surprised. From that day forward I did just assume that I would go to college.

Q: Was there any pressure put on you to become a nun or anything like that?

HUHTALA: Oh, they always advertise. I think I probably spent about two weeks thinking about that seriously and then decided no. These were very traditional nuns and the way they put it was, you can go the carnal way if you have to and get married and have children and do all of that. It's a holy state, it's fine you can do that. But if you are really special, if you want to go that extra mile, you can join religious life. Well everybody thinks, I want to be really special but then I thought about it, nah, I don't think so.

Q: I interviewed one man who was brought up in the Catholic Church. He went to school where Mother Seton is, you know Mount St. Mary's or something and he got there and found his mother and this priest had signed, all the courses were signed up where obviously to make him a priest. He said, "Wait a minute. This isn't for me." They had him all mapped out.

HUHTALA: But at that period a lot of religious were leaving. I graduated from high school in 1967 and in the next two or three years half of our teachers had left the order. The priest who married us in 1971 left the priesthood shortly thereafter. There was a lot of turmoil in the Church just a few years after that period when we were all being "recruited" for religious life.

Q: In high school boys were sort of off to one side or something so was there much dating or anything like that?

HUHTALA: Some of the girls had boyfriends. Some of them dated. A lot of us just scrounged up somebody to take to the junior prom; that was me!

Q: I take it that the drug culture hadn't even touched?

HUHTALA: No, not at that point. There wasn't any drinking that I was aware of either. Maybe I was just out of it but I don't think those girls were very much into that.

Q: How about in San Jose, was there an automobile culture? I think of the movie, American Graffiti which is based in kind of that area. It was about that time.

HUHTALA: Yes, on Saturday nights people would "drag the main" in their cars.

Q: Did you go out with the girls?

HUHTALA: No, although we were all very excited when we got our driver's licenses. I didn't get mine until after high school but knowing those who did was exciting.

Q: Did you have any after school or summertime jobs?

HUHTALA: No, I didn't, I mean besides babysitting, and I found the summers very long and boring, really profoundly boring. That was one of the reasons I think I decided to have a very active life. I didn't want to live like that. I would bake. I learned to be a wonderful baker in the summer times, and I learned to sew. My Mom showed me how to sew. You know, those nice traditional things. I took swim lessons. One year I took Algebra II.

Q: What was San Jose like in those days?

HUHTALA: It was still largely agricultural. There were still a lot of orchards in town and around the town on the hillsides. It wasn't anything like it is now. It was much smaller. Of course this was before Silicon Valley was even a concept, you know. It was a nice town. The east side of it was kind of wild. The kids over there in east San Jose were more Hispanic and more getting into trouble. We lived in a very placid suburb called Willow Glen which is now very expensive. It's lovely. It was a pretty different town then it is now.

Q: Well you graduated in '67, whither?

HUHTALA: I went to the local Catholic university. It's a Jesuit school, Santa Clara University. I moved on campus so I could move away from home; even though it was just five miles away it was important to me to move into the dorm. I had a California state scholarship. They used to have this wonderful program which paid the bulk of my tuition and fees and boarding. I also worked, on and off campus. I had a couple of other little loans. I had work study. I had this patchwork of financial sources. For three years I worked as a secretary in a CPA office, part time during the school year and full time in the summers. All together, I was just able to swing it.

Q: You went there for how long?

HUHTALA: Four years.

Q: Four years. What was the school like?

HUHTALA: It had only begun admitting females in '64 and I entered in the fall of '67. So it was going through a transition itself. Men were still in the majority; only about a quarter of the student body were women. This meant we could write our ticket socially. That part was really fun. I was ready then to start dating and I did. The boys were very polite; they would even open doors for us. It was neat. We were not allowed to wear blue jeans to class so I usually wore a skirt and nylons, believe it or not. Santa Clara was relatively untouched by the student radicalism at Berkley and Stanford, though as the Vietnam War dragged on we did have some demonstrations and plenty of anti-war discussions.

Q: Because this was, it reached its height.

HUHTALA: I know. Santa Clara had a reputation as a party school. It was on the quarter system so we had classes Monday and Tuesday, Wednesday's were off for study and then we had classes Thursday and Friday. In practice this meant we had two Friday nights a week so there was a lot of drinking, a lot of partying around. We had an ROTC program, which was not very popular; they drilled loudly near the girls' dorms on Wednesday mornings! I remember a couple of years into this we marked the moratorium against the war, and there was a lot of feeling when the U.S. invaded Cambodia.

Q: That was '70.

HUHTALA: '70, May of '70. When that happened the University of California at Berkley shut down, with mass demonstrations. Stanford also shut down. Santa Clara was going to soldier on until we got word that if we didn't cancel classes students from those schools would come and shut us down. So we shut down. We had our war protests, but we never had anything very violent.

Q: Who was running this school?

HUHTALA: These were Jesuit priests. The Jesuits are fabulous because they are relatively free thinkers. In Catholic terms they are way on the left because they are willing to question everything. For instance, we had one priest who was a noted theologian who offered a very popular course on the theology of marriage. He actually gave us talks in our dorms in which he suggested that premarital sex was not the most terrible thing you could possibly do. If you were responsible and you loved each other, it could even be moral. He opened the door a little bit to the idea of contraception which of course, was forbidden by the Church. That has been the great revolution in the Catholic Church in America. Most Catholics use contraception even though we are not supposed to.

Q: But it was sort of absolutely, I mean you almost couldn't discuss it could you?

HUHTALA: The very fact of having a priest discuss those things was electrifying, as was the fact that he was sort of liberal. He didn't say that these things are okay or it's no holds barred but he said you are adults, you have to make your decisions in a moral way. You have to have relationships that are honest and true to each other and be responsible, all of which was music to our ears.

Q: Was the question of priests getting married, was that?

HUHTALA: Again, priests were leaving the orders in order to get married a lot. But the question of whether there should be a married clergy had not really come up yet. Much less the issue of should there be a female clergy!

Q: Did you find yourself sort of questioning Catholic theology at all?

HUHTALA: Yes. As a Catholic student I was required to take a certain number of courses in theology. I took fun ones, like comparative religion and Biblical criticism. The required theology course in freshman year was very dry, as we had to study the documents of the Vatican Council. All students, whatever their religion, also had to take a certain number of philosophy courses. Those were fabulous. They really expanded our minds and got us to think in radical new terms. We studied about existentialism and phenomenology and all of these new concepts. Sometimes I felt like my brain was just exploding; it was very exciting.

Q: Were you majoring in any particular thing?

HUHTALA: I majored in French. Back in high school I had struggled with this. As the class valedictorian and the top student I felt that I should perhaps major in something "serious" like science, but my heart was always with foreign languages. Throughout my teens I had studied them for fun; I studied Spanish and French on my own during summers. It suddenly occurred to me that I'd be much smarter to follow my heart even if being a language major looked frivolous (to me at least the idea looked very frivolous). So I did, I majored in French and I also studied Spanish and German. Then I took all these other courses, philosophy and history and sociology and psychology, a very broad sort of liberal arts program. The combination made me a very well-rounded person, I think.

Q: At one point I served on the Board of Examiners and I went out and recruited and I remember going to I think it was St. Mary's College which was part of Notre Dame I think. All the girls who showed up were all French majors or something which turned out to be a problem for recruiting for the Foreign Service because they weren't taking political science or as much history and they're taking more literature and they had to try and work on the exams. That's all changed now but I mean I came through a period when this, in a way language is a great way for the Foreign Service but at the same time you're not picking up the imperative government. Were you getting much of that?

HUHTALA: I was getting a little of it. I was taking various history courses and there was one, a history of modern France that was sort of pushed on us language majors because the teacher himself was fluent in French. When several of us took the course, we had to hold a conversation group in French to discuss the course material. The subject was modern France from the 1930s on. I viewed that as an experiment that didn't work terribly well, but it was interesting.

Q: What about foreign affairs and all while you were at college, how much did this intrude?

HUHTALA: Well I had participated in the Model UN in my sophomore year of high school. I had joined the foreign affairs club that year that at the public high school and loved it. Looking back now I see an interest in foreign affairs starting very young. I have to say that during my college years I was mostly focused on international cultures, literature, language, those things. I followed the news but not excessively. I was working and I had a full course load and a serious boyfriend so I had a full plate. It was only later that I developed a real, professional interest in foreign affairs.

Q: Sort of in your group and all was there much interest, outside of Vietnam of course is overriding because the draft was breathing down the necks.

HUHTALA: The draft was still there. We were in college when they had the first lottery. Up until that point the draft was just a constant fear.

Q: How about during these years of civil rights and all that?

HUHTALA: A big, big issue. In fact we had a number of African American students at our campus who came in on scholarships to leaven our primarily white Catholic school, and a lot of them were fairly militant. There were some tensions there. We also had a militant Hispanic group who called themselves La Raza, you've probably heard of that, and Cesar Chavez, was very active in our area.

Ours was a very brave university in many ways. One year they had a week-long event called The Christian-Marxist Dialog and they invited as speakers people like Eldridge Cleaver and Angela Davis. When Eldridge Cleaver came, of course the room was packed, I remember being in the overflow room listening to the speakers on the PA system. Cleaver got in there and said, "You honkies, you're all racists and I raped that white woman and it was good." He was being as provocative as he possibly could, and the students answered back. Angela Davis did the same thing. She was an outspoken black Communist, very in your face. The alumni association withdrew all kinds of money because of this event. I thought it was fabulous. I thought it was pure academic freedom at its best even though I was offended by what those people were saying. I thought it was really great to have the opportunity to hear these things and think about them as part of our education.

Q: What did this do to your thinking?

HUHTALA: It opened it up, all of it. This whole period was just a marvellous expansion of horizons, new ideas and critical thinking.

Q: You've already got this French major and you're going to graduate in '71. Then what?

HUHTALA: Well that's it. In the winter of 1969-70 I sat back and asked myself what I going to do with this degree. I did not want to be a French teacher, I realized that. I did not want to spend my life as a non-native speaker of French teaching other people to say je suis, tu es, il est, etc. So I asked myself what else could I do with my degree. I went in to see my French program advisor and he said, "Oh but Marie, you'd make such a good teacher." I said, "No, I don't want to be a teacher. What else can I do with a degree in French?" He looked blank and he said, "Well, I suppose you could be a bilingual secretary." I was crestfallen because I was working my way through college as a secretary off-campus, and damned if I was going to do that for the rest of my life, even in French. I went into a bit of a depression, not a serious one, but I was really bummed out by that. I was not sure what I was going to do, or if I should even finish my studies; the fact that it was winter probably had something to do with my gloom. Some months later, it was my boyfriend, my future husband Eino, who saw a poster advertising for the Foreign Service exam. I had not even noticed it. He said, "Well if you're so interested in using your languages why don't you take this test?" So I took it as a senior in college with no idea of what the Foreign Service was or what I would do if I passed it.

Q: You had never considered diplomacy? To you it was just a name.

HUHTALA: I was very much casting around for something professional to do. And at this point I was beginning to confront the contradiction of being a stellar student, a high achiever and also a woman, who was supposed to get married and have babies. It was very important to me to have something professional in my future, but I hadn't settled on a definite plan. So I took that test without any particular expectation and I passed it the first time. That's when the rubber met the road; I had to start making some decisions.

Q: Did you have any people to who you could go to and say what is this Foreign Service thing?

HUHTALA: No, I didn't. Nobody in my family had ever done anything like this. My parents and relations had never gone overseas, let alone lived overseas. I myself had not yet left the state of California. It's a big state, and I'd seen much of it, but I had never yet set foot outside it. Entering the Foreign Service was a big leap into the dark for me, but I had always longed to travel and I was feeling very adventurous.

Q: Your boyfriend, later your husband, what was his background?

HUHTALA: Eino's father had served in World War Two as a naval aviator and worked for the rest of his life at the Alameda Naval Air Station, near Oakland, California. He worked as a mechanic or something like that, but he rose to a supervisory position. His Mom had worked in various jobs, including in the local cannery and doing clerical work for a company. Eino is also the oldest child in his family. He spent his summers working hard, building Peterbilt trucks at a plant near his home in Fremont, making good money for college. Like me, he attended Santa Clara University, and he didn't have a clear idea what he wanted to do either. In the same month when I took the Foreign Service exam (December 1970) we were struggling with the question of whether or not we should get engaged. We made that decision right before Christmas. About a month later I found out I had passed the written exam and we asked ourselves what we were going to do. What we both really wanted to do was travel, to see the world and get out of the Bay Area, so we thought we would just try it. Just jump into it and see what it's like.

Q: When did you take, you took the oral exam?

HUHTALA: That was in April or May of 1971, at the Federal Building in San Francisco. Eino drove me there and waited for me while I took it.

Q: How did that go?

HUHTALA: The first question the three examiners asked me would be considered totally illegal today (and may well have been then): "I see from your autobiography that you're engaged to be married, is that true?" "Yes,." I said. "What would your husband do if you got in?" I said, "Well, he is as interested in travelling overseas as I am, he'll go with me." "Oh, they said, okay". I did not know that in 1971 it was still not allowed for married women to join the Foreign Service, or that Foreign Service women who got married were required to resign. I had no idea. So essentially the oral interview was kind of a sham because they passed me believing that I would never get in because I was going to get married in two months. Looking back now I can see what was going on, they were checking a box.

Q: Well did you, were there any other questions?

HUHTALA: Yes, there were lots of good questions on current events and foreign affairs. I had not been following these things closely during my student years but in preparation for the exam I had been boning up by reading Time magazine and the daily newspaper. For example, they wanted to know who Souvanna Phouma was; I knew he was the premier of Laos. They wanted to know what the ABC countries were (Argentina, Brazil and Chile) I remembered that one from grade school geography class. There were a few hypothetical questions, asking what I would do in this situation or that. It was a substantive test, with a writing sample, and I thought I handled all the questions pretty well. Once or twice there was a question I knew nothing about, so I said I didn't know rather than make something up.

Q: Well what happened?

HUHTALA: What happened was I passed the oral. And in July 1971 Eino and I got married and put our lives on hold waiting for the Foreign Service to offer me an appointment.

After about nine months of married life, Eino and I were getting impatient. We were still working in the entry-level jobs we'd had through our college years and we were bored. (I was still a secretary at the CPA office; Eino was a quality control inspector for Memorex.) We still wanted very much to live overseas, and it didn't look like the Foreign Service was going to come through for us. So Eino applied for graduate school at the American School of International Management (also called Thunderbird) near Phoenix, Arizona, a school that is well know for placing its graduates with international firms. He was accepted for the summer term, and in late May 1972 we moved to Arizona. I got a job as a junior accountant in a large cattle feed lot operation, and Eino began grad school.

That was the summer when my feminist awakening began in earnest. My job was a far cry from the kind of work I wanted to do. During the lunch hours, I was even asked to replace the receptionist and answer phones while she went out to eat. So I sat there, reading Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer and the other "founding mothers" of feminism, and I was getting angrier and angrier about my situation. It didn't help that Eino's classmates at Thunderbird were all very traditional, most of them married with their wives putting hubby through, and at their social gatherings I began to feel like we were back in the 1950s. I felt that the Foreign Service was never going to happen for me and I needed to do something professional with my life. I even enrolled at Arizona State to study graduate French literature (not a field I would have stayed in, I'm sure). Then in mid-October I suddenly got a phone call from Washington saying, "We have an opening in the next A-100 class, and if you can be here in three weeks you can join the Foreign Service." Unbeknownst to me, they had lifted the ban on married women in mid-1972. It was tough to make such a major decision so quickly, and it was not easy for Eino to stay behind and finish his studies, but this job offer seemed like a life line for me. I grabbed it.

Q: Actually that whole ban on women being married getting out was not even in the regulations I don't think or as I recall.

HUHTALA: Well I know a lot of women who had to quit because of it.

Q: Oh they had to but when questioned they say well show me the regulation. There wasn't one I'm told. I interviewed Eleanor Constable and she was one of the first few challenges that said well lets see the regulation .

HUHTALA: Well it's a very old-fashioned idea, but there you are. Eino has always been a strong supporter of women's rights, but this was hard for him. As I said the people at Thunderbird were very traditional, and there were no married women taking those classes. When I left for Washington I think he took a little bit of ribbing from the other guys, and he felt like he didn't have his support system like all the others did. But he did not stand in my way. He came and visited me at Christmas and he eventually joined me at my first post.

Q: Let's talk about, you came in when?

HUHTALA: November 1972.

Q: November of '72. What was your basic officer course like?

HUHTALA: It was about six weeks long. We had 48 State Department students and I think another 8 or 10 from the US Information Agency (USIA). The USIA people weren't with us most of the time so I don't remember them as well. Of the 48 State students, six of us were women. Two of those were married women who had had to quit earlier and were coming back in because the policy had changed, starting all over of course. There were also three single women.

Q: How did you find the courses?

HUHTALA: Well, I was scared to death at first. I was just petrified. First of all everything about Washington was new and different and unfamiliar and cold. A lot of that is to be expected - I was coming from Arizona, for heavens sake. I didn't know how to behave, how to navigate all of this. I had come in as a consular officer but I didn't know much about that specialty. In those days you selected a cone on the application to take the written exam. I had read the descriptions of the different cones and consular work sounded nice because it involved helping people, so I checked that box. Fortunately, during the orientation course we explored all the cones, including economic, political and administrative in addition to consular. At one point we were asked to write a paper about politics, about the recently completed national elections. I did really well on that paper, sort of surprising myself, and that's when I thought, "Maybe I could be a political officer, who knows?" I really did not know what I would end up doing, it was all so new.

Q: Did you find there was the usual phenomenon when young males get together sort of like a bunch of youngsters showing each other I'm smarter than you or I know this or that. That must have been going on.

HUHTALA: It was very strange to me. There was a lot of that. There were so many times that someone would raise his hand to ask a question of the speaker, but first have to speak himself for five minutes about what he already knew. One of them had had a brief internship or something in London and he became famous among us for starting out every intervention with, "Well when I was in London we did such and such." We were all behind his back saying, "Oh here comes Mr. when I was in London." I don't think any of the women played that game. I certainly did not.

Q: Did you find yourself sort of, the phenomena I mentioned before that where the guys took over all the questioning and sort of the women were expected to keep quiet and left behind or not?

HUHTALA: I asked questions when I needed to but most of the time I was taking in all of this completely new information. I didn't have time to formulate questions. A lot of the guys who were asking the brilliant questions had been in government before or had worked in foreign affairs already or had some basis on which to do it. Also a lot of them had advanced degrees. At that point I only had my bachelor's. So I was sort of observing and taking a lot of notes and trying to integrate it into my own head. It's not that I couldn't ask a question if I wanted to.

Q: This is a pretty strange society.

HUHTALA: It's all very, very different.

Q: When you went what was the contract you and your husband had about what was he going to do, or was there a contract?

HUHTALA: He remembers that we agreed that I was going to go into the Service for one year and then we would re-evaluate. I remember it as we'd do one tour and then re-evaluate. I had no kind of commitment to this as a whole career, not at all. I wanted to get out, get some experience, get my feet wet and then see where I would go from there.

Q: Did you have any feel for, you'd been to the foreign climate of Arizona. Did you ever get down to Mexico at all?

HUHTALA: We visited a border town (Tecate) for a few hours once.

Q: Did you have any feel for, I mean obviously you spoke French; did you have any feel where you wanted, what were you asking for?

HUHTALA: I asked for Paris. Paris was the only place in the world I wanted to serve at that time because I already spoke French. Also my husband back in Thunderbird was studying international management with a focus on Western Europe and he was studying French. I presented all of those arguments to the counselors and by golly, I got Paris. I got to go to the only place in the world I thought I wanted to go.

Q: So you went to Paris in, you were in Paris from when to when?

HUHTALA: April 1973 till June 1975.

Q: What was your job?

HUHTALA: I was in the consular section. What that meant initially was the NIV visa line. Back in those days French citizens had to get visas like everybody else. We had a very crowded waiting room, we stood behind a counter, but there was no glass window. The applicants would be smoking their Gaulois cigarettes and blowing smoke in our faces and it was very trying to interview them under these situations. After about 11 months on the visa line I was really burning out. It was very stressful work. I noticed other young officers were being allowed to transfer into the other section of the consulate, to issue passports and perform American citizens' services. So I made a bit of a stink and asked for a transfer, which I got. I took over the portfolio of the "deaths and estates" officer for a whole year.

Q: Who was the Consul General then?

HUHTALA: Bill Connett, did you know him?

Q: I know the name. Who was the ambassador at the time?

HUHTALA: The ambassador was Mr. Irwin.

Q: You must have found that this was a huge establishment.

HUHTALA: To a certain degree, I felt lost. For one thing the visa section was physically separated from the embassy. It was over in the old Talleyrand building, a few blocks from the main Chancery, so I didn't really feel that I was part of the Mission. If I wanted to read the political reporting being sent out from the Embassy I could walk over to the Chancery on Avenue Gabriel and look at it (which I did a few times), but we visa officers weren't integrated into the main operations. The DCM, Galen Stone, a nice man, tried to mentor the junior officers but I think I met with him maybe twice in my whole tour. There were quite a few junior officers there so every six months my turn would come up to go sit in and observe the Country Team meeting. It was not enough to get a real sense of what U.S. objectives were in France or what was really going on. I felt that nobody outside of my immediate chain of command in the consular section had any real interest in me, knew who I was or what I was doing.

Q: This of course is always the trap of some places like Paris where people think, people at all levels, they get there and it's very easy to get lost because people are busy.

HUHTALA: I think the Service does a much better job now of mentoring our junior officers. Many years later, I was the DCM in a very large embassy and none of our JO's felt like that. When I was a junior officer, though, our leadership didn't put very much emphasis on mentoring us.

Q: What happened, where were you living?

HUHTALA: Oh that was fun. We were living in the Seventh Arrondissement, near the Eiffel Tower.

Q: You're saying we, now?

HUHTALA: My husband joined me that summer, a few months after I got there. He had just finished grad school. I had found us an apartment on Avenue Bosquet. It was lovely. It was fun to be living in Paris and using French all day long. I enjoyed it. Gradually it dawned on me how hostile most of the Frenchmen were, especially the Parisians were very anti-American at that period. When we went out of the capital and traveled around the countryside people were much nicer. Paris itself was kind of tough. I rode the metro everyday.

Q: Kind of like New York?

HUHTALA: Yeah, kind of. I took the metro and I went to see French movies and walked around the city. All of that was a lot of fun.

Q: Did your husband find a job?

HUHTALA: No, poor guy. Britain had just come into the Common Market, as they called it. All of a sudden being a native speaker of English no longer counted as a skill that would get you a work permit. You had to have skills that nobody in the entire Common Market had, so he couldn't get a work permit like we had been hoping that he could. In fact we had a very interesting run-in with the French government. When Eino arrived the Embassy sent in a diplomatic note requesting a consular ID card for him as a spouse; there came back a diplomatic note from the French saying that they did not issue these ID cards to the "husbands of female agents" unless such husband was either disabled or over the age of 65. The Embassy was great, very supportive of me. They drafted a note in response that said, "The U.S. Government considers Mr. Huhtala a dependent with the same status as all of the other dependents of our officers. We issued him a diplomatic passport and his travel here was paid for by the Department of State. Therefore we think that you should treat him like you treat all of the other staff." There was always a delay of around two months between all of these notes. Eventually we received a note in response that said, "The French government would like to know what Mr. Huhtala plans to do while he is living in France." So we sent back a response that said, "He plans to study the French language." He had in fact started at Alliance Française while waiting for this issue to be resolved. That did the trick; he was granted his Carte de Séjour soon afterward.

Q: Well he can't be all wrong.

HUHTALA: The Embassy had never had a situation like that before. Eino was the first.

Q: As you say they had just allowed married women to come back in the business.

HUHTALA: In fact before that when we were still in Washington he took the Foreign Service Wives' Course at FSI and they had to change the name to the Spouses' Course.

Q: Was there much, in the consular section, was there much collegial of the young officers?

HUHTALA: Yeah there was. We'd all go out to dinner together and entertain each other in our homes. That was nice.

Q: Often this is another aspect of Foreign Service where later you look back on this and you've made some very good friends there because you're all together in this thing and you don't have to worry about the people on the top because they don't know you exist.

HUHTALA: Yes, exactly.

Q: Did you get any feel for what was going on in France at the time? This is about four years, three years after the '68 business.

HUHTALA: Right. I knew that Charles De Gaulle's successor, President Georges Pompidou, passed away about a year after I arrived and Valery Giscard d'Estaing was elected President. I had a vague, general understanding of what was going on politically there. But not in any real depth.

Q: How about the Paris Peace talks, were they going on then?

HUHTALA: No, they were in '72. I got there in April 1973.

Q: Oh yeah. So Vietnam was more or less by this time sort of over.

HUHTALA: I was, however, in Paris in April 1975 when Cambodia and then South Vietnam fell to the communists. I'll never forget, I was in the American citizen services office and in came a young Cambodian couple. They were studying in Paris and they had left their baby with Grandma back in Phnom Penh; they were scared to death and beside themselves. Was there anything we could do? and there was nothing we could do. I thought that was so sad. Then, I remember there was the orphan airlift out of South Vietnam and one plane crashed. I remember all of this terrible news coming in while we were in Paris.

Q: Would you talk a bit about the death and estates job. I'm a consular officer by profession. Can you tell us any experiences?

HUHTALA: Oh gosh, how much time do you have?

Q: I think it is interesting to get some of these stories of early experiences.

HUHTALA: It was really interesting. First of all there was a backlog because the previous one or two incumbents hadn't really done all the paperwork so there were still personal effects of deceased Americans waiting to be inventoried. They had a little vault in the basement of the embassy full of dead peoples' underwear and that kind of thing and that all needed to be done. Then the week I moved over from the visa section there was a major air crash, a big DC-10, Turkish Airlines, crashed into the forest north of Paris.

Q: Oh yeah, I remember that, a door came out.

HUHTALA: A cargo door. We lost about 25 Americans there, including several entire families, very sad. In June 1974 they had a memorial service for all the victims, many of whom were in an unmarked grave. The airlines brought the family members over from the United States so I had to take care of them. I escorted them all - I think there must have about 10 or 12 of them on a drive up to the place in the forest where the plane had crashed. I had not yet seen it so I wasn't yet prepared for it. It still looked really raw. There were still big gashes in the ground and a tree limb sheared off and pieces of clothing still hanging from the trees; no one should have asked relatives to look at that. That was very unnerving. Then I had to take them to a shed where there was a huge table with all of the unclaimed personal effects laid out. (Now we had already returned to the families the effects that we could clearly tell belonged to their family members.) These were piles of watches and jewelry and things like that and we were supposed to ask these families to look through all of these things and see if they could find anything that belonged to their family members. That was very hard for them. I was 25 years old and two months pregnant (but it wasn't showing yet). I said, "Let's go get some coffee." I was just feeling my way through this. We went to a café^{1/2} and we ordered coffee. They pulled out pictures of the family members that they'd lost, and I thought this is going to be hard, but in fact it was really good. It was very healing for them to show me all the pictures of the people who had died and tell me what their names were and what they were like and tell me some stories. I understand now what was going on but at the time this was new to me too. I just sort of instinctively, I think, did the right thing.

Q: Did you have any sort of contact with dead bodies that you had to take care of and all that?

HUHTALA: My two "best friends" were the two French undertakers that serviced Americans. They were hilarious. One of them had been in the business for many, many years. He had a professionally glum face. He always dressed in black three piece suits, and he would tell me all these gory stories, for example, about an American who had been murdered and how they took a chain saw to cut the head off and how hard it is to saw through the head. My God, my cocktail chatter during that tour was really gross. People would move away from me in a cocktail party!

The other undertaker was a former cement manufacturing who got bored in mid-life and sold his company and bought a funeral home. For him this was all an exciting new lark. He took me to his place of business so I could see his caskets. In the window they had the lozenge-shaped ones like in Dracula movies. That's what they were using in Paris in those days. In the basement he had something special to show me. There had been an exchange of some sort and his company had received an American casket, a big bronze rectangular thing with a hydraulic lift so that the head of the deceased could be raised. He just thought that was the funniest thing he had ever seen.

I never had to handle a body myself during that tour. I did later on but not then. What I would have would be the bereaved, the freshly bereaved coming in to see me. One Monday morning I came in to work and there was a lovely middle-aged woman whose teenage son had died over the weekend. He had cancer and was in remission and they were visiting Paris to cheer him up, and just like that, he passed away. What do you say to somebody in that situation? I guess that's what I was learning.

There was another time when a woman in her 50s came in. She had been visiting Paris with her fiancé^{1/2} who was also of that age, and he wanted to impress her, so he climbed up the Eiffel Tower. He didn't take the elevator, he climbed up all the stairs and they enjoyed the Eiffel Tower and then they went back down, on a summer day, then they went to the hotel and he was taking a shower and his heart just gave out and he died in the shower. Not only was she very, very sad to lose him, they were not yet married so she was not the next of kin. I had to ask her to give me his son's coordinates so I could I contact him. I had to get instructions from his son about what to do with the body and all of that. She took that with a great deal of dignity but I could see that it was distressing. It was very hard for us both.

Q: I have to say as a consular officer I found on these things this is where you might almost accuse me of sexism I guess, but women consular officers are usually better at this than males. Guys really can't handle this very well, myself included.

HUHTALA: Because I was doing that for my primary job for a whole year I got pretty good at it. I learned how. At first it was very difficult for me too. As a culture we Americans avoid death at all costs.

Q: It's one of these things and one doesn't think when they think about diplomacy.

HUHTALA: Oh yeah, you don't think about that. You know what I found in the files there? (I told you they were a little bit backed up!) Jim Morrison's death certificate.

Q: He was the Doors?

HUHTALA: The Doors, oh yeah, he was one of my favorite musicians. He died in Paris in 1971 and so in '74 I found his Report of Death of an American citizen in the files. I thought that was fun.

Q: He's buried in

HUHTALA: Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

Q: That's what I thought.

HUHTALA: It was interesting. I also did some passport work, working as a back-up, and I managed the federal benefits program.

Q: Was there any system covering development of various things within the Foreign Service establishment. Was there anything equivalent to family liaison officers or something, I mean something within the embassy to find a job for your husband?

HUHTALA: No. That came a few years later. That did not exist yet. He was sort of at loose ends. He eventually found a job teaching English on a contract basis to French students. It wasn't ideal but he made some friends through that. There was a lot of stress on us.

Q: What about the contract you had, one year or one tour?

HUHTALA: Well a lot happened before we got to that point. I got pregnant, deliberately. I got pregnant in early '74. We'd been married almost three years, it was time, right? But you would have thought that there had been a tsunami or something when I told my boss. Actually I was chatting with Bill Connett's secretary in French and telling her the news. He came in and he overheard. He said " Tu blagues! (You're kidding!)." No kidding, I was indeed pregnant. It turns out the embassy in Paris had never had a pregnant vice counsel except one, some years before, when one of the single women got in trouble with a French guy and had to marry him, and they kept her on despite the ban on married officers. But in general the experience had always been, vice consuls are men and men don't get pregnant. So my condition caused a bit of an uproar. I was surprised, because no one seemed to have thought of the obvious fact that married women would be starting their families on the job.

Q: Well you couldn't get up to the counter as easily.

HUHTALA: Now, now. I worked through most of the pregnancy. I was doing fine. I transferred over from visas to death and estates, and I was fine. Then at about seven months I went on a Thursday night for my check-up and the doctor found that I was starting to dilate and needed immediate bed rest. "Don't get up until I tell you," said the doctor. But I said, "Tomorrow is Friday, can't I go and clean out my desk and arrange for an orderly back-up?" No. Well as fate would have it, my boss at that time, the head of the ACS Section was a woman who had been forced to choose between marriage and the Foreign Service and she chose the Foreign Service. Although she tried to be understanding, my sudden absence was difficult for her.

Q: That was the generation that never, it was difficult for them to see the next generation.

HUHTALA: It was. I'm sure she thought I was a smarty pants and I thought I had everything. I was in bed for around three weeks until I was allowed to come back to work. I went into labor a week after that. Then I had my six weeks of maternity leave. So I was away for a long time. When it came time for my efficiency report she put something in about how I had done a good job but I did create a burden in the section by being gone for a long period of time. Then she asked me to state in my statement that I had no problem with her saying that. That shows you how confused and uncertain we all were. I decided to be forthright about it and in my statement I said, "Yes, I was away on maternity leave. I had a daughter." That was the end of that.

Q: You didn't name your daughter visa or something like that?

HUHTALA: No, her name was Karen Rose.

Q: Well what did this do to your plans?

HUHTALA: All of a sudden now the dynamic was different. I had a steady job, we had a baby to support, and Eino didn't know what he wanted to do. Without actually discussing it, we pursued a second assignment. In fact I was in the hospital with the new baby by my side when Eino brought me the mail and in it was a letter from my career counselor. This was before the open assignments system; you just sort of indicated preferences. I had indicated I would be interested in going to Finland, Canada or the Far East. (I thought number three would be a throw-away!) So the letter says, dear Marie, Finland and Canada don't look very good but the Far East looks promising. At that time it was November 1974, Embassy Saigon was still open, and I was a French speaker; I looked at my little tiny baby and thought, oh no. What am I going to do? As soon as I could I got in touch with them again and asked which of the half-dozen entry-level consular jobs open in Asia included language training. Only one did and that was Chiang Mai, Thailand, and that's the one that I took. That changed my life.

Q: So your off, you took time?

HUHTALA: We returned to Washington for a year of Thai language training prior to my next assignment.

Q: This was in all of '75 more or less?

HUHTALA: The training started in August of '75.

Q: Through '76?

HUHTALA: Yes; it was scheduled to go through June 1976, but I was called to post early due to service needs.

Q: How did you find Thailand?

HUHTALA: Well Thai was my first non-European language, and I was fascinated by it. I loved it. My husband took it also. He worked nights so that he could take Thai during the day. We were both studying Thai and it was exotic, it was fun, it was very different. I made very rapid progress. In April the embassy in Bangkok said they needed me in Chiang Mai at once because my predecessor has already left. So they tested me and gave me a 3-3. (I don't know if it was a real 3-3 or not, the standards were probably different back then, but I was more than ready to go and start using Thai on the job.) So they sent me out to post. At that time, in the 1970s, northern Thailand was not a place where you could speak English anyway. So we were moving into a very Thai environment and soon my language got really good.

Q: Who did you replace there?

HUHTALA: Her name was Linda Irick, but she had married a local Peace Corps volunteer so her name was Linda Stillman at that point.

Q: So you served in Chiang Mai from when to when?

HUHTALA: '76 to '79. I extended.

Q: Let's talk about when you got there in '76 we just pulled out, we were pulling I guess Air Force and all sorts of things were happening then. What was the situation in Chiang Mai when you got there?

HUHTALA: The Thai had begun to feel very exposed when Vietnam and Cambodia fell because Thailand had been a major base for U.S. forces during the war. A lot of U.S. troops visited there for R & R, and also we had Air Force bases there. For years we were bombing Vietnam out of Thailand. The Thais asked us to leave completely, to close down all of our bases and remove all of our forces. By the time I got there in April of '76 that process was almost completed. There was an Army base up in northern Thailand in Lampang, near Chiang Mai, that was still in the final stages of closing down. So one of my first duties was to deal with the sort of consequences of that. There were young women who came in and said the servicemen had fathered their children, and now they didn't know where they were, that kind of thing. The human side of it was still playing out. Northern Thailand at that time also had an active communist insurgency, supported by China. It was not safe to travel in the hills alone. There was a lot of banditry, there was a thriving drug business and there were refugees coming out of the hill tribe areas who were settled into formal refugee camps. One of the things I had to do was go and visit those refugee camps periodically, kind of monitor conditions there.

Q: What was our post there?

HUHTALA: We had a Consul.

Q: Who was that?

HUHTALA: His name was Maurice (Mack) Tanner. I was the vice consul and we had about 10 or 13 other people who worked for other U.S. agencies.

Q: This is Thailand. The CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) was running the war. They had troops in Laos.

HUHTALA: That had ended by then.

Q: But there had been.

HUHTALA: By the time I got there the CIA post was very focused on the drug situation, primarily heroin coming out of Burma. We also had a DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) office. There were three or four officers plus a secretary. We also had somebody from the Department of Agriculture doing research on alternative crops that could replace opium. We had a USIS branch post, including a library.

Q: Oh boy. Now what were relations like with the Thais would you say or that you saw?

HUHTALA: At that time I couldn't have told you what the government-to-government relations really were like, but I can tell you how things were in the North. We had very good cooperation with the Thai authorities. Our major partners were the Thai Border Patrol Police, which the DEA and CIA station worked closely with, and of course the regular provincial officialthe governor, the police, etc. Thais are wonderful, warm and friendly people. They're a lot like Americans in that regard. They don't stand on formality like the French. And they enjoy partying! In a lot of ways it's easy for Americans and Thais to work together, and I appreciated that a lot.

One of the first things I did was go to a party the Consulate had organized with the Border Patrol Police. This is how I began to work out what my approach was going to be as a woman. I walked into the party and all of the men who were going to be my contacts, people that I need to meet and work with, were standing over at the bar having drinks. All of their wives were sitting in another part of the restaurant at a table, having orange soda. What I did was, I went over to the wives first and met them all. "Oh sit down," they said, "have some orange soda." "No, no that's okay." I did not sit down. I talked with them all for about five minutes, then I went over to the bar, got a drink and started talking with the men. What I was doing was not something that a woman would ever do in their society, but I began to realize that they were seeing me basically as a space alien. I was an American official who happened to be a woman so I could get by with non-typical behavior.

Q: I think this has become sort of the norm everywhere that people, you're in a different category so you're not upsetting.

HUHTALA: I had to figure that out for myself because I had no mentors at that time. I thought it was important to first reach out to the women and not let them imagine that I was after their husbands or something. Parenthetically, I must tell you that the officials I had to deal with in Paris, the police and others, were horribly sexist. As a young woman, they just treated me like dirt. It was really hard to be taken seriously there. But I've never had that problem in the Far East, starting in Chiang Mai; it's just never been a problem.

Q: What were your main duties as vice consul?

HUHTALA: This was really fun because we did not issue visas there, we did American services work. We did visa referral letters for our contacts to go down to Bangkok and get their visas. I did what other consular work needed to be done. I also did political reporting, economic reporting and set up a small commercial library; I also did all the administrative work, which was complicated because the folks who worked for other agencies thought it would help their "cover" to funnel all their work through me. They had more generous allowances for their housing, for their furnishing and that kind of thing so it was a little bit tricky to handle that. But I loved the variety of the work.

I did a lot of travel around the consular district to visit the refugee camps or to go with the Consul and official visitors to look at crop replacement efforts. The consulate had an airplane on contract. Pilates Porter, almost like a glider. I signed the rental contract for every month but it really belonged to the CIA Station; they encouraged the Consul and me to use it for our official travel too, to enhance cover. So we could get into our very own airplane and fly to wherever we needed to go, especially when we had visitors from Washington who were interested in the heroin problem, because there were a lot of refineries in Burma just on the other side of the border there. We'd get up in that airplane and over fly the border and they could look down, they could see the little buildings where the heroin was being refined and they could see the people firing at us, only their little rifles wouldn't reach us. It was kind of wild stuff.

Q: Who was sort of the province, was it several provinces or a province?

HUHTALA: Our consular district included the whole North. I forget how many provinces, maybe 10.

Q: Was there a general sort of in charge of the area?

HUHTALA: There was a regional military command at Phitsanulok. I traveled there too and oh boy, I'll tell you, I did this with the Consul and we had some of the military attaches up from Bangkok. I remember one time we were sitting around with these Thai military having our local whiskey, our Mekhong, with soda (at least I put soda in it!) and for snacks we had thousand-year eggs. Have you ever seen those things?

Q: No.

HUHTALA: They are regular eggs that are buried in ash for six months and then they open them up and serve them. By this time the egg whites are brown and glassy, kind of transparent, and the yolks are green and runny. Of course it stank to high heaven and I was thinking, how am I going to eat this! The Thai officers were really pushing it on me, try this. I told myself, all right, remember French $\text{p}\ddot{\text{ü}}\frac{1}{2}\text{t}\ddot{\text{ü}}\frac{1}{2}$, remember the brown gelatin that would come with the $\text{p}\ddot{\text{ü}}\frac{1}{2}\text{t}\ddot{\text{ü}}\frac{1}{2}$, all right that's what you're going to pretend these are; and of course the green runny yolk is going to be Camembert cheese to you, and just do it. So I did it.

One time I remember we were visiting a hillside in that military region, an area on the border with Laos that was not pacified yet. As I said, there was still an insurgency going on, with active fighting. The Thai government had adopted a very smart strategy of building roads into these areas and building housing developments so that the people who lived there could farm and then get their products out to market; the idea was that this would bring economic prosperity, and in time it did work. They were starting it at that point in the late '70s and we were up there visiting it. It was just me and one of my local employees the Consul wasn't there. The Thais were showing me the housing and all of a sudden we heard these thuds in the background, there was fighting on the next hill. The look of alarm on the colonel's face said it all - "Get this American woman diplomat to safety, if we lose her we are going to be in big trouble" and so they hustled me out of there.

Q: Well then did you find that, were things that you were aware of going on across the border into Burma or into Laos? Were there all sorts of operations going on?

HUHTALA: I don't believe there were American operations going on. There was a lot of opium and heroin coming down out of Burma into northern Thailand, on donkeys essentially. In the same backpacks were jade, a lot of beautiful jade coming out of Burma. One of my husband's many avocations while we were in Chiang Mai was doing lapidary work, and he often visited the local jade dealers who had this Burmese jade; he learned how to discuss the jade business in their southern Chinese dialect. Our DEA office approached Eino and said, "Gee, you've got great contacts, would you work with us?" He absolutely refused because he didn't want to have any kind of conflict of interest. He wanted to keep doing jade with them. He was not interested in the narcotics at all. He wanted to keep that clean.

Q: Did you get involved in the missing in action type of thing?

HUHTALA: Later in my career I got deeply into it but at that time it was not an issue.

Q: You weren't having peddlers coming out of Laos with bones and made up dog tags and that sort of thing?

HUHTALA: No, that happened later. This was the 1970s still. The only thing coming out of Laos at the time were refugees.

Q: What was happening with the refugees?

HUHTALA: They were in camps. Camps that were organized along the lines of the society they had had in the past. People who had been hillside dwellers in Laos were in camps situated on hillsides. We once visited our friends at the Consulate in Udorn, in Northeastern Thailand, and visited that refugee camp too. That had an area where the lowland Lao were situated in the low part of the camp and the hillside people were up the hill. The hill tribe people were doing the most beautiful handicrafts, wonderful embroidery. This was just about to take off as a hot item for tourists and everything, and we were picking it up dirt cheap.

Q: Were you getting involved with the DEA or not? Did they sort of do their thing and you did your thing?

HUHTALA: The Consul and I very deliberately had a separation of duties on that. He was the narcotics officer for the post and he had a formal liaison with DEA and did the policy things. I was the consular officer, who looked after Americans in trouble. That way when Americans got arrested for trafficking dope of any kind they had me as their advocate, and they wouldn't see me also working with the narcotics officers who put them away.

Q: This is a problem I use to run across. I remember I was in Greece and they were trying to make me into both the consular general and the narcotics liaison. I said I can't do it. One guy I think left, the rest of the other guys saying I'll try to get you out if I can.

HUHTALA: It was fortunate that there were two State Department officers there to do that work.

Q: Did you have, when we pulled out people out most of them obviously were men at that time in the military and the Thai women were the most beautiful women in the world. I would think an awful lot of guys would just sort of disappear in the bush with the ladies.

HUHTALA: We had retirees actually. We had a small coterie of retired military guys who were with their Thai sweeties and living very well on their pensions.

Q: So they weren't a particular problem were they?

HUHTALA: Well, a couple of them were real serious alcoholics and this was really sad to watch. But they mostly kept to themselves and they were okay. We had one of them for awhile running our little branch of the commissary up there. He did fine.

Q: How about your relations with the Embassy?

HUHTALA: It varied. One good thing about being up there was that there was a non-pro courier run every week or two. It was mostly stuff for the Station and this was a way to get down to the Embassy for free if you just carried the pouch. For awhile, when it was my turn, the pouch was really light. It was just a bag of papers, nothing to it. The other weeks it would be very big and bulky and heavy. Gradually I figured out the Station thought that a woman couldn't be entrusted with all of their stuff. When we realized what was going on, my boss, the Consul, who was a pretty strong supporter of women's rights in his own way, had a talk with them and said, "Look, you have to let Marie do it like everybody else." I was bigger and stronger than some of the men they had working in that section. Mack said, if this guy can guard the pouch so can Marie. So they readjusted it. This gave me a chance to get down to Bangkok about once every six to eight weeks. I would go to the admin section, follow up on all the different aspects of admin, operations, consular section, check in with political. That's when we had the first CLO.

Q: CLO is?

HUHTALA: Community Liaison Officer. The first one started while I was doing my Chiang Mai tour.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

HUHTALA: Charlie Whitehouse and then Mort Abramowitz, two ambassadors.

Q: Where you involved in political reporting?

HUHTALA: Yes.

Q: What was happening? Were you seeing, were the northern provinces, was there a separatist movement or how did the writ of Bangkok run?

HUHTALA: Before I got to Thailand in the earlier part of the 1970s there had been some serious student uprisings. A big one took place in early 1976, before I got up there. Some of the intelligentsia, particularly students, had fled Bangkok and gone into the north to join the communist insurgency. Beyond that, this was a time of great instability in Thailand. In Bangkok there were military coups almost every year. During the three years that I was there they had coups two years in a row, always in October when the military promotion list came out. The third year there was an election, though the country was not yet a very good democracy; it was struggling in that way. These events didn't seem to have a direct impact on Chiang Mai or on the North, which was dealing with its own issues. Like I said, there was banditry, the narcotics trade and occasional insurgent attacks. The question of who was in and who was out in Bangkok didn't seem to make a lot of difference for us. The King had a winter palace up there in Chiang Mai. While he was in residence, every time he arrived or departed the whole diplomatic corps, all five of us, had to go out and stand on the tarmac to welcome him. While he was there various prime ministers and heads of government would come through in order to call on the King. That kind of brought us more into the greater world, and it was kind of interesting.

Q: This communist insurgency, they had these rather peculiar things going on in Burma at one time, red flag, white flag, black flag or something. What form of communism was going on in the upper regions?

HUHTALA: The Chinese government was actively supporting communist movements all through Southeast Asia up until the late '80s. You had the Burmese Communist Party in Burma, you had what we called the CT's, or communist terrorists, in Thailand, there was a China-based communist insurgency in Malaysia and also one in Indonesia. The whole region was sort of turbulent because China was bankrolling these efforts. There were different manifestations in each country but it was always a low-level insurgency, so an official who was out on his own on a country road would risk being ambushed and killed, that kind of thing.

Q: While you were there was this a period when the Vietnamese were having a nasty little war with their great Chinese allies?

HUHTALA: That happened, if I remember correctly, in January of 1979; I remember Ambassador Abramowitz was visiting Chiang Mai at the time. We were with him when he got a call from Bangkok because the Vietnamese had just invaded Cambodia. I remember he wrapped up his visit and hurried back to Bangkok. There was a great deal of fear in Thailand at the time that Vietnam was going to overrun them. When Vietnam started moving west they were very, very worried in Thailand. They had asked American forces to leave in 1975, but in 1979, after that war, they invited us back in. We had our first big ship visit down in Pattaya that year; I remember banner headlines in the newspaper, "The Americans are back, and bar girls are descending from all over the country." The Thais never again allowed us to establish the kind of bases we had during the Vietnam war, but still 1979 was a turning point in terms of the bilateral military relationship.

Q: Was there any effort, you had these bases, were they just of overgrown or did they keep them going just in case we wanted to move back in?

HUHTALA: They were all turned back over to the Thai. We didn't keep them although there was a huge installation in Udorn Thani that was still there. I believe it is still there to this day. We have leased back part of it for VOA broadcasting. The airfield at Utapao belongs to the Thai but we are allowed to use it as much as we want. For instance, the U.S. tsunami relief effort last year was based out of Utapao.

Q: Did you get much in the way of visa work or was that all taken care of in Bangkok?

HUHTALA: I had some good contacts in the North, and when they needed a visa we would write referral letter to the consular section in Bangkok. I remember one time I was furious because the wife of the mayor, a member of one of the landed families, a very respectable lady and a solid visa case, came in; I gave her a letter and she went down to Bangkok but the vice consul there didn't issue the visa. I was so irritated. I felt at that time that the consular personnel, certainly in Bangkok, were just horrible, on little power trips and very bureaucratic, with no soul to them at all. That's when I began thinking very seriously that I had to either get out of consular work or get out of the Foreign Service. I couldn't stand it. See, my horizons had been broadened a lot by doing all these other kinds of Foreign Service work in Chiang Mai. In Paris I had only done consular work but now I was beginning to see the bigger picture. I just found them to be very insensitive down there.

Q: Did you get much supervision or advice or anything from the economic and political sections in Bangkok to what you were doing or your Consul?

HUHTALA: I got a lot of mentoring from the Consul, who had worked in the political section in Bangkok and who had also been Consul in Songkhla. He was a real Thai hand. I got a lot of training from him. That's when I wrote my first political cables and kind of learned the ropes. I didn't get too much help from the Embassy, although occasionally officers would come up and we compared notes, that kind of thing.

Q: I assume you had help to take care of you daughter?

HUHTALA: Yes, and I had my son then too. Our second child, Jorma David, was born in Thailand. Both our children grew up speaking Thai as their first language. We had live-in help, which was great. It was one of the reasons I extended.

Q: So you were there three years? Did you feel at all the reach of the drug culture? I'm talking about the corruption and all that?

HUHTALA: Yeah, there was corruption all around us and we certainly saw that. As I said I had a fairly heavy consular workload concerning people who were into drugs. We had a couple of overdoses and that kind of thing.

Q; Were we getting the international or college kids getting off on their year abroad and back packing around there?

HUHTALA: We had some of the world travelers. The Australians had quite a few more because Thailand is sort of in their backyard. It's hard for Americans to get as far away as Thailand but we had some.

Q: What other consulates were there?

HUHTALA: The British, the Indians, I think that was it at the time.

Q: Australia none?

HUHTALA: No. The British handled Australians.

Q: What were the Indians doing there?

HUHTALA: This is interesting. There was an Indian community there who had been there for maybe 50 years. They were involved primarily in the cloth trades. They felt discriminated against and they wanted a consul to defend their interests, so they petitioned the government in New Delhi, saying, "If you send us a consul we will take care of him and support him." And that they did. They paid for his housing and all his expenses and that's how they got their consul. It was cool. Even though there were all these Indians in town, there were no Indian restaurants. Indian National Day was the day to go to the Indian Consulate and eat all this wonderful food cooked by the families of Indians who lived there.

Q: Social life in the towns, was there much?

HUHTALA: Yeah, there was a lot for us because we spoke Thai, and we had Thai friends. We also had a lot of American friends, including Americans who were married to Thais. There was also a large missionary community there. They kind of ran the school and certain aspects of the social life like the Christmas bazaars and that kind of thing. They were far too sanctimonious for my taste. We didn't socialize too much with them.

Q: What about Thai students who went to the United States? Was there a considerable, a lot of Thai students I guess?

HUHTALA: Well there are more now than there were then, but there were some. There was a university there, Chiang Mai University. At the time it was about 10 or 15 years old. They had exchanges with U.S. institutions; for instance, St. Olaf's College sent students over for part of a semester. Because it was a university town there was a lot of cool stuff going on in the arts and that sort of thing.

Q: Had the information age reached in there? Later the technical age of computers and that sort of thing, I think the Thais tend to concentrate on developing this, training people. Was that happening while you were there?

HUHTALA: No, no, not at all in the '70s. It was way in the future. I saw my very first video tape then; the USIS office had them. I had never seen such a thing before. But no one else in the community had access to this technology.

Q: I know, I remember watching with awe at that sort of thing.

HUHTALA: My husband taught at the local international school. We had an international school that went through the eighth grade. He taught science and he also took over the woodshop. The kids were tired of making wooden salt shakers and plaques so he brought in jade and taught them how to make jade pendants for their mothers and that kind of thing. That was wildly popular. (He had learned basic lapidary skills at the YMCA in Chiang Mai.) He did that for two years and then he got tired of it and decided not to teach for the third year. At that point the Vietnamese boat refugees were pouring out of Vietnam, this was 1978-79. So he went down on a part-time, intermittent (PIT) job to help out with our Consulate in Songkhla, dealing with those Vietnamese refugees. He did that for about three months.

Q: How did you find the relationship between, well the consulate and maybe the embassy too, but with the NGO's because this is the beginning of a real change.

HUHTALA: What we had then were lots of Christian missionaries. Some were old and established and others, less so. For example, three congregations in Alabama would get together to support one missionary individual who would come out and teach the heathens. The missionaries were working largely with the hill tribes. They were doing some interesting work like giving them a written language for the very first time. Giving them a Bible in the Lisu language, for instance, so that they could have written traditions but also spread the faith. Some missionary families had been there for many years, having been pushed out of Burma near the end of the Second World War, or maybe earlier, I don't know. Others were relatively recent arrivals. The Lutherans, I think it was the Lutherans, had been there for a hundred years. They started a local college. There were a fair number of Christian Thais as a result.

Q: So there wasn't the tremendous establishment of NGOs designed to help refugees, teach democracy all that sort of thing? That came somewhat later?

HUHTALA: That came somewhat later.

Q: This is probably a good place to stop maybe. We'll pick this up next time, you left Chiang Mai in 1979, where did you go?

HUHTALA: Washington.

Q: Today is the 19th of October 2005. Marie, what did they do with you in Washington?

HUHTALA: I returned to Washington to be a line officer in the secretariat, S/S.

Q: That's considered to be very time consuming job but at the same time really very prestigious. This is where sort of the younger officers are selected. People get into that usually end up going somewhere. They get known to the powers that be. But here you are a mother with two small kids.

HUHTALA: Yes, I brought back my Thai nanny because I knew the hours were going to be long and I was told I would be doing a lot of travel so I brought back the nanny and set her all up, legally I might add.

Q: You paid her social security.

HUHTALA: Absolutely. I started in at the Secretariat. It was a huge leap because I had spent the first seven years of my career overseas; this was my first domestic assignment. I had to learn the whole alphabet soup of the Department and the way it was organized. I had been looking forward very much to the travel but that year, as it turned out, there was almost no travel by the Secretary of State.

Q: Who was the Secretary of State?

HUHTALA: Cyrus Vance at the beginning of the year there. If you recall it was in November of 1979 was when the U.S. Embassy was taken over by militants in Tehran. As that crisis dragged on, President Carter pursued what was called a Rose Garden strategy in his campaign for re-election. He stayed in Washington, did very little foreign travel, and Secretary Vance didn't travel much either. I remember I went up to New York in September 1979 to help cover the Secretary's meetings at the United Nations General Assembly, but that of course was not a foreign trip. I also went with the Secretary's party to La Paz, Bolivia, I think it was in October, for an OAS summit. That was interesting, my first big trip, what I thought would be the first of many.

Then in early November the hostages were taken and I didn't get another trip overseas until the following spring. Cy Vance had resigned by then, in protest over the abortive military raid to rescue the hostages in Iran. Edmund Muskie was the new Secretary of State and he went to Europe for the annual NATO (North American Treaty Organization) meetings; I helped staff his trip to Brussels and Vienna. At the very end of my year in the Secretariat, in probably June, I went to Malaysia to advance the Secretary's attendance at the annual ASEAN Summit, and that was the end of my year. So I spent most of that year sitting in a windowless cubicle going through hundreds of cables every day and inspecting lots of documents that were on their way up to the Secretary of State making sure they had the right clearances, that kind of thing. It was very tedious work. It was not what I had been expecting.

Q: Did you get any feel for the Washington establishment, who did what to whom and?

HUHTALA: Well, I was beginning to. Naturally it was my first exposure to all of that. The way they had it organized back then was that there were eight line officers and each one had a portfolio of Bureaus that they were following and they were responsible for the documents and the clearances coming up from those Bureaus; usually we each covered one geographical and some functional bureaus. I was given the Latin American Bureau; it was called ARA at the time. We were also partnered with another line officer and we backstopped each other. The one I was partnered with had the Africa Bureau (AF), so I was kind of watching events in those two continents. I remember some of the toughest cases we had were papers coming out of ARA that had to get a clearance from the brand new Bureau of Human Rights, headed by Assistant Secretary Patricia Darien. Many memos and policy recommendations were coming up to the Secretariat without the proper clearances, so I had to "bounce" them and work with the different Bureaus to get compromise language. I was really getting my first taste of Washington bureaucratic politics.

Q: Pat Darien really exerted her powers through the clearance procedure?

HUHTALA: Absolutely. She was no slouch at manipulating that process. This was of course in the years leading up to the "contra" problems in Latin America so there were things going on in Central and South America that were pretty much at variance with the wishes of Ms. Darien and the Human Rights Bureau. There was kind of a struggle going on there.

Q: Did you find yourself getting between bureaus, between say the ARA bureau and Human Rights?

HUHTALA: By the nature of the job you had to do that. It was an interesting experience for me to get involved at that level. At the end of the year (for it was only a 12-month assignment), when it came time for my evaluation, the director of the Line said to me, "You know, Marie, when you started I wasn't sure you were going to be very successful here because you don't have a very confrontational style. I thought you were going to be too understated to make things work. But actually, you did very well. You brokered a lot of compromises and things worked pretty well." So I guess I demonstrated that there is more than one way to skin a cat.

Q: Did you get any feel for your fellow colleagues in the secretariat?

HUHTALA: Sure.

Q: What were they like?

HUHTALA: There were some future stars there. Bob Frazier, he was one of the line officers, Gene Martin who went on to do China work, Mark Grossman was a staff assistant at the time for NEA, Pat Kennedy was a staff assistant for M, and Paul (Jerry) Bremer was my reviewing officer. He was the Deputy Executive Secretary of the department. Peter Tarnoff was the Executive Secretary.

Q: Did you feel that this experience did as it has so many said, you came to the notice of people who later on are movers and shakers, did they ask you your name?

HUHTALA: Yes, I think it served that function. Ray Seitz was the other Deputy Executive Secretary. Ray Seitz and Jerry Bremer were obviously two future stars in that system. It served the purpose of getting me known a little bit in the Department. However, I realized then that I don't enjoy staff work, that I much prefer substantive analysis. Some people spend their entire career s doing some sort of staff work.

Q: Actually we have a very successful career doing this. To me it would be a house of horror.

HUHTALA: I didn't enjoy it either. It was not my cup of tea. A few years later when I became a desk officer and I was really able to immerse myself in the substance of a bilateral relationship I was much happier. I don't think I ever again had an assignment of a purely staff nature.

Q: Did you get involved in any of the embassy takeover in Tehran, also the burning of our embassy in Tehran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan? That was a big, it was November, December of '79.

HUHTALA: It all happened that year. When the embassy was taken over, like many people in our services, I knew somebody personally who was in there, Victor Thompson, the political counselor who was also a Thai hand. I had gotten to know him when I was studying Thai before I went out to Thailand. So we were all quite worried about Vic. If you recall he and the Charge, Bruce Laingen, had been at the foreign ministry delivering a demarche at the moment when the embassy was taken. They were held at the ministry for a few months, where they were able to keep a phone line open to the Ops Center and relay messages back to Washington. I remember Vic relayed some of the information in Thai to circumvent Iranian eavesdroppers. When the hostages were finally released our Thai instructor had a big party for Vic and we all turned out to welcome him home. Then there was the invasion of Afghanistan. I remember that the U.S. organized a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics in response; it was coordinated out of the Operations Center and I helped out a little bit on that effort as well. Then of course I remember how shocked we all were when the aborted rescue attempt took place in spring of 1980 and Cyrus Vance, for whom I had the utmost respect, resigned in protest. It's pretty rare in our government when you have a senior official resigning in protest. I can't think of another example off hand. So that impressed me very deeply.

Q: Did you develop any personal feelings towards Carter and his foreign policy ?

HUHTALA: I got to meet him once in the context of a big White House meeting. I thought that the injection of human rights into the substance of foreign policy-making was new and perhaps ill-advised. I could see where he was coming from but I could also see how that was upsetting a lot of apple carts. Of course it has proved to be an enduring element of our foreign policy ever since but at times it has been allowed to take priority over other national interests.

Q: I was in Korea at the time. Of course Korea had a different situation. We couldn't help but feel we had a very nasty bunch of people 30-40 miles away from us over the 38th parallel and we felt this was upsetting things.

HUHTALA: I would say that President Carter was fairly naïve about that too because you can't just call on people to be good. At the same time I think it is very important for our country to be in the lead among nations in promoting human rights. As long as we don't do it in hypocritical ways - and we often have slid into hypocrisy when we do it. I'm thinking of our annual human rights reports which are often a real exercise in preaching hypocrisy and rub every country the wrong way, even allies like Canada and Britain. They get upset with our report, perhaps because we don't turn that search light on practices in our own country. Other organizations do that but we don't. I think there are right ways and wrong ways to make human rights an important element of your diplomacy; in any event, the effort to do so was probably the major contribution of the Carter administration.

Q: This took you '79 to '80. In 1980 where did you go?

HUHTALA: In the summer of 1980 I moved to the Africa Bureau. Remember that was one of the two bureaus that I'd been working on. I moved to their regional office doing congressional affairs, which was really interesting. You know we have the H Bureau which is the official channel for the State Department's action on the Hill but most of the other bureaus, especially the regional bureaus, have an officer who also follows congressional relations from their point of view. I teamed up with the H person who did Africa, who was a very nice guy who showed me the ropes and we did a lot of walking the halls of Congress. State Dept. officers cannot lobby Congress, but we could certainly talk to staffers and inform them about the administration policies. I got to accompany a big CODEL to Africa while I was in that job.

While I was in that job the 1980 elections took place and Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter. One place where there was a sharp about-face in foreign policy as a result was in our relations with southern Africa, particularly South Africa. I was struck by how incredibly partisan the Hill is. Everything that goes on there is discussed in terms of Republicans versus Democrats and for every issue the question is will this or will this not help me in my next election. On the House side they are constantly running for re-election because they have to go up every two years. On the Senate side they get to step back a little bit and take a slightly longer view but they still have the next election very much on their minds. Some of the staffers that I had gotten to know while Carter was in office proceeded to tease me pretty harshly because I was now arguing the Reagan foreign policy. "What's wrong Marie, have you changed your mind? Have you changed your fundamental beliefs about what we should be doing in South Africa?" I tried to articulate the argument that I've carried all through my career, that fundamental U.S. interests do not change from one administration to another. You see differences in emphasis and differences in strategy but fundamentally we still stand for the same thing around the world. That was the first time I had to make that argument, and it was to another part of our own government!

Q: Did you get the feeling from your colleagues when the Reagan administration came in, what was this kind of engagement?

HUHTALA: Constructive engagement.

Q: Constructive engagement with South Africa due to the apartheid and all that. Were the sort of African types that you were dealing with, was this a little hard for them to swallow or did they like it?

HUHTALA: It was kind of a radical shift because the Carter Administration had made a big deal about its opposition to apartheid in South Africa, using very moralistic terms. The assistant secretary had been Dick Moose, a flamboyant character in his own right. I don't know if you ever met him?

Q: Oh yeah.

HUHTALA: Very liberal guy. Now Chet Crocker came in under Reagan, a very conservative man but I came to respect him very, very much because he was intellectually very rigorous and he didn't play games; he was very serious and very engaged. History shows that he eventually did achieve a wonderful transition in South Africa. The way they were approaching the issue in 1980 and 1981 was to say, the politics for this area don't work. We're not getting anywhere with this government. The government of South Africa knows that it's in a horrible position but we're not helping them find their way out of it. We're just condemning them and encircling them and all of this. They're Boers, they've circled the wagons and they're going to fight to the death according to their national character. So we're going to change the emphasis here, we're going to try and engage with them and see if we can't move it forward a different way. Even during the period of constructive engagement we were supporting something called the Sullivan Principles, which had been worked out by an American pastor and laid out guide lines under which American companies could morally invest in South Africa. Remember there was the anti-investment campaign which was very, very big. When I took that CODEL to South Africa, for instance, we visited a Ford Motor plant in South Africa where blacks were given equal opportunities with whites, the only place that was happening in that region. They were trying to pursue social justice and be a responsible company. I guess what I'm saying is I didn't, even though I thought apartheid was absolutely abhorrent and a terrible tragedy, I didn't have a major problem with this new approach that the Regan administration was pursuing.

Q: How long were you doing this?

HUHTALA: I did that until late '81 when a vacancy came open in the office of West African affairs. They needed a country desk officer for Upper Volta (as it was called then,) Niger and Chad. There'd been a gap of a couple of months, maybe three or four months, there was quite a backlog and they asked me to go over and I did it willingly.

Q: Upper Volta, Niger and Chad?

HUHTALA: And Chad. Then a few months later Chad took on huge importance because the Libyans were encroaching on it.

Q: This is the Toyota wars? Do you remember that term? At one point there was an awful lot fighting with machine guns smuggled in the back of Toyota pick-ups. This is when Libya came in?

HUHTALA: Libya was claiming what was called the Aouzou Strip in the northern part of Chad, which was reputed to be rich in minerals. Remember Libya was a very bad actor at that time and the Reagan administration had decided to really confront Qadhafi. In a way, it was sort of a prelude to the current idea of an axis of evil.

Q: Before the bombing of

HUHTALA: Of Tripoli, that was in 1986.

Q: After the bombing?

HUHTALA: It was before that. This was late '81, early '82 and by early '82, because Chad was assuming so much importance in work load, they moved Chad out of West African affairs into the Central African Affairs officer as a single-country desk officer position. I was given the choice to stay behind in West African Affairs and do Upper Volta and Niger, or go with Chad, which is what I did. I loved that job. It was really, really interesting and fun, with a lot of different aspects to it. When I first came on the desk our embassy in the capital, N'Djamena, was closed. It had been closed since the outbreak of civil war back in '79. We'd evacuated everybody out to Cameroon. Things had calmed down a lot by '80, and in '81 we decided to reopen it at the Chargé d'affaires level. We sent somebody in to reopen the embassy building with its bullet holes in the wall and retrieve the AID representational silver service that was still locked in a safe, all very dramatic. We set up an embassy again and by the time I left in the summer of '83 there was factional fighting in the capital again. In fact one of the last things I did was organize relief flights through the Pentagon for the victims of that conflict.

Q: How did we view Chad?

HUHTALA: It's one of those situations where there are no real good guys. The southern part of Chad is black African and Christian, the northern part is Berber and Muslim. The riches were all in the south but the government was often in the hands of the northerners; constantly shifting the factional forces. It was a very complex sort of situation.

Q: How much supervision or who was looking after this part of the African? Crocker was terribly concentrated on South Africa.

HUHTALA: The Deputy Assistant Secretary who really followed that was Jim Bishop. He was the one that our office reported to.

Q: Jim had the delightful privilege of having been pulled out of two embassies by evacuation.

HUHTALA: Somalia.

Q: Somalia and Liberia.

HUHTALA: Liberia too. He was a tough nut. He really was.

Q: Were there any sort of competing forces about what to do in Chad? Sometimes you get from congress or from the pentagon or from NGOs and all people with their own interest and that. Did you feel any of that?

HUHTALA: One of the reasons this was such a great job is that it was kind of below the radar in many ways, at least until the end, in my last six months, when the conflict erupted again and the NGOs became very active care and the others were trying to save lives and we were pulling in American relief flights. Shortly after that the French actually sent forces in from their fortress in Central African Republic I believe, from Bangui. It erupted into a big issue in the summer of '83 but in the couple of years leading up to that it was just a country with a lot of endemic problems. No real controversy in how we approach it but a fair amount of prominence within the State Department because of the Libyan angle, which meant people cared about what we were doing.

I loved the job because there was really one person in the whole State Department who worked on Chad full time and that was me. At the end, after I left, there was this cartoon that appeared in the Washington Post. It showed a desk with a man sitting at it and it said, "Chad Desk." The guy was sitting there, frame after frame, getting more and more sleepy and finally his head goes down on the desk and then in the last panel, boom, explosion, he's looking around scared. My colleagues wrote the cartoonist and he sent me the original drawing with a little note, "To Marie Huhtala, with apologies for the sex change." I framed that. I had it on my office wall for years.

Q: Did you sort of talk to or work with the African man at the French embassy? We have an African man at our Paris embassy.

HUHTALA: Oh you mean the American embassy in Paris?

Q: We have an African person at our embassy in Paris. I was wondering if the French had an African person in Washington at their embassy.

HUHTALA: I think they did. I don't remember him. I remember the Japanese use to send over a political officer to talk to me often. Of all people, the Japanese were very interested.

Q: Well the Toyotas.

HUHTALA: Maybe those Toyotas. I think they had some assistance programs in the southern region of Chad.

Q: What would you do? You say you're terribly busy but what did you or could you do?

HUHTALA: First of all there was whole business of setting up an embassy out of nothing. That took a lot of work. Then we sent in the skeleton staff and we had a European specialist go out as the Chargé^{1/2}. His name was Jay Peter Moffat. I think he had always expected to be an ambassador.

Q: His father had been ambassador to Canada.

HUHTALA: His grandfather was Joseph Grew, the great diplomat who was Ambassador to Japan when World War II broke out and later served as Acting Secretary of State after the war. Another ancestor helped negotiate the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1927, I was told.

Q: Grew was Ambassador in both Japan and Turkey.

HUHTALA: So Peter had always expected an exalted career. Well we sent him out as Chargé first of all and it was a rough hardship post. I don't think it was what he was used to. I don't think he had served in Africa before. So I did a lot of backstopping for him. For instance, when it came time to write the human rights report he just said he couldn't do it, he was just overwhelmed, so I wrote it in Washington and sent it to him. He looked it over and submitted it. It was that kind of very hands-on of support. I went there, visited the post and checked out what they needed and that kind of thing. Peter did eventually become Ambassador to Chad when, I think it was after Chadian President Habré took over and we were able to elevate diplomatic relations to the ambassadorial level. Of course I helped him in his confirmation process. At that time I was also back-up to the desk officer for Cameroon and we had an official visit by the president of Cameroon that year so I had a lot of papers to write for that. It was a very active portfolio.

Q How did we view Hissène Habré? He became the president for some period of time, or he was in and out wasn't he?

HUHTALA: In '82 he was a white knight. He was replacing this guy named Goukouni Oueddei who had ties to the Libyans. So he fought his way city by city to take over in N'Djamena and we thought this was a good thing. We gave him support. Later on, I haven't followed it closely, but I know that now he is considered a war criminal because he went down the wrong path after he consolidated his power. At the time he was the one that we were betting on. You remember what the early '80s were like in Africa. There were a lot of proxy wars going on. There was Angola, there was Ethiopia. There was a great tendency by the Reagan administration to see these local conflicts as a sort of proxy being played in the context of the Cold War.

Q: Did you find yourself trying to analyze what was this war with Libyans about and put it in non-cold war terms?

HUHTALA: Yes, I think I was always able to see what was going on in the continent on two levels. There were serious indigenous problems that arose from the colonial mess that European powers, especially the French, had left behind. Look at a country like Chad, that's not a natural country at all. It should have been two countries. The boundaries that France left behind were quite perverse, really. Qadhafi came to power as basically a populist dictator with no love of the west. So there were all these kinds of forces that were already in existence there, including a lot of corruption and a lot of tribalism. Then you had the political overlay of Cuban involvement, Soviet involvement, the U.S. seeing it in Cold War terms because we frankly didn't want to get involved in any conflicts on the European mainland where all of those nukes were. I could see both dimensions of that. It wasn't too hard to figure out. I guess the key always was, and this has been true in other parts of the world too, Foreign Service officers as area experts try not to lose track of the sort of underlying dynamics of a situation and make sure that that is reflected up to the political thinkers so that we don't get the two lines too badly out of sync. When you do, you end up supporting repressive regimes that really would not be in your interest to support.

Q: Was there an aid element to starving or this sort of thing to what you were doing?

HUHTALA: There had been a major aid mission in Chad before the pullout in '79 and they were one of the first agencies to go back when we re-established relations. They had very large missions in the Sahara obviously, including in Upper Volta and Niger. In most of the countries of the Sahel there were longstanding projects. So they went back in. The Chargé there, later Ambassador, was trying to do what all his colleagues did, to make sure the aid program was rational, that it was reaching the right people and that it would have a good prospect of success.

Q: After doing this did you get a feel for being an African hand?

HUHTALA: Well you know, I liked Africa. I wouldn't say I loved it but I would have been prepared to serve a tour of duty there. I was kind of intrigued by it. In fact, an Ambassador once surprised the hell out of me by asking me to go out as his DCM. It was Fernando Rondon. He was on his way to Madagascar. I thought, oh wow, DCM, that's fabulous. I went home and popped it to my husband and he said, "Where is Madagascar?" So I told him where it was, he says, "Well, let me think about it." He went to the library and looked it up and there were only two references in the card catalog. One was for a book that had been checked out 10 years earlier and never returned, the other was for a National Geographic issue entitled, "Madagascar, the Ends of the Earth." It said basically that there was no industry there except vanilla growing, and it was in the middle of nowhere. Eino could not see his way clear to going to Madagascar and being without work for two or three years. And what about our kids? They were in grammar school then. They certainly didn't speak French, which was the language of Madagascar. It just became really clear that I couldn't take that job. The AIDS crisis had not yet popped up yet, but I knew the health situation in Africa was also quite questionable. My kids were under 10; I just couldn't get my mind around to taking them all off to Africa so I had to decline that very nice offer.

Q: So then what happened?

HUHTALA: So then I cast my mind back to East Asia. While I had been in Chiang Mai speaking Thai and enjoying the culture there I had been mindful of the strong Chinese influence in the area, in the language, in the culture and all of that. Thailand has the most successfully integrated Chinese population of the whole region so I saw a lot of this there. I thought maybe now was the time for me to study Chinese. I figured I had time to do one more hard language; it should either be Chinese or Japanese. I weighed the two (now this was in early 1983), and I knew Japanese was the language of business and finance and there was a lot of money to be made after the Foreign Service if you were a Japanese hand. At the same time, China was beginning to rise; it was already very important in the region and who knew, maybe it would have a great future. So I went for Chinese. I got an assignment as a China watcher in the political section in our Consulate General in Hong Kong, but before that I had two solid years of Mandarin training, one in Washington and one in Taiwan.

Q: How did you find Chinese?

HUHTALA: In some respects it's very similar to Thai. It's got the same kind of tones and a monosyllabic word structure, and word order rules rather than declinations and conjugations as far as grammar goes. Yet I found it a lot harder than Thai. For one thing the characters just killed me. Thai has an alphabet. It has 42 consonants but you can learn 42 consonants. And if you can learn those, you can read Thai. To get your 3-3 in Chinese, on the other hand, you have to memorize 3,000 characters. That's hard. And a truly educated Chinese speaker knows 10,000 characters. When you got through the FSI program, you have to learn both the traditional characters and the simplified ones that are used on the mainland. And, whereas conversational Thai will get you through almost anywhere, for Chinese we had to learn several levels of the language, including very elevated Chinese, with quotes from old proverbs going back to Confucius' time. Learning Chinese represented two solid years of serious application.

Q: How did you find Taiwan?

HUHTALA: Interesting and a little strange. Taiwan had a parliament that was made up of people who were representing various constituencies in old China, places like Shanghai and Hunan and Fujian. They retained this fiction of representing all of China even though a lot of the seats were empty because the last time they had an election was in 1949 and the legislators were dropping one by one. There we learned an awful lot about Chinese culture, about the mainland as our teachers understood it. There hadn't been a lot of contact between the two up to that time so their understanding of it was a little bit outdated. They did have a lot of written material to teach from that had been sent in by our Embassy in Beijing. This material was written in the simplified characters and it used all of the communist formulations for political discussions. It was very interesting.

Q: Where you able to get a hold of mainland newspapers and things like that?

HUHTALA: Yes, we did, as we had them in Hong Kong when I got there. We read articles from Peoples Daily, both at FSI in Washington and in Taiwan. They were brought in to us by diplomatic pouch and they were carefully controlled. For example, we were warned not to leave them in our cars, visible through the windows, as that might get us in trouble.

Q: How did you come out of that course?

HUHTALA: I got a 3/3+ in Mandarin Chinese, and I also took a couple months of Cantonese because I was going to Hong Kong. This was an interesting experiment because Cantonese is about as different from Mandarin as French is from Spanish. They clearly have the same origin but they're different languages. So I did all right on the language study. We also had some interesting experiences travelling around the island.

Q: Who else was in the class with you?

HUHTALA: Joe Donovan was in my class. He is now our DCM in Tokyo. Keith Powell, a consular officer, and his wife Janet; plus a lot of people who were not from State and who are no longer around.

Q: You went to Hong Kong, how long were you in Hong Kong?

HUHTALA: Only two years, unfortunately.

Q: This is from when to when?

HUHTALA: From 1985 to 1987.

Q: What were you doing?

HUHTALA: I was in the political section, doing China mainland reporting. At that time we still had a very active China reporting unit in Hong Kong to supplement the work of the Embassy in Beijing and the Consulates in other parts of China.

Q: In many ways you could get around more?

HUHTALA: We had access to different contacts. There was a large refugee class because everybody in Hong Kong seemed to have fled the mainland at some point or other. They had a real refugee mentality too - very insecure, very much trying to enrich themselves and make the most of the time they had. There were also political dissidents there. We met with professional China watchers, including some of the academics in the universities. There were members of the clergy who were in touch with the underground church in China. And there were China-inspired newspapers that got all of their direction from Beijing but published in Chinese for the Hong Kong population. There was often a lot of really interesting information leaked in those papers and in some of the political magazines that were being published in Hong Kong; things that one wouldn't dare publish in China but could in Hong Kong, with the full understanding that people in China would eventually get to see them.

Q: Who was the Consul General at that time?

HUHTALA: First it was Bert Levin and then it was Don Anderson.

Q: By that time we had full diplomatic relations.

HUHTALA: Oh we had had for a while, since the late 70s.

Q: Under Carter we opened up.

HUHTALA: In fact when I went to Taiwan we did not have diplomatic relations there. We operated through the American Institute in Taiwan.

Q: Did you have much contact, was there much contact between Beijing and Hong Kong?

HUHTALA: Yes, there was. We visited back and forth. Sometimes we'd coordinate a reporting project. In the past there had been some tension between the two because Hong Kong was or was seen as a rival source of information for Beijing. The ambassador there rightly objected to that, I mean who wouldn't? By the time I got there it was a more collegial kind of relationship. We were coordinating and helping each other out. Particularly we were collaborating with the Consulate in Guangzhou because at that time the whole Pearl River delta was beginning to emerge as a powerhouse of its own. So there was a lot of really interesting economic reporting that we could do.

Q: Did you end up looking at any particular aspect of China?

HUHTALA: Yes, I was pretty much slated to look at social aspects, like religion and youth. It was a very sort of vague portfolio, I'm afraid. I did do some work on the leadership dynamics. In fact, I was very proud of the fact that I wrote a cable predicting that Li Peng, one of five or six vice premiers, would make it to the top. When I came back on consultations to Washington the folks in INR were quite intrigued, asking how did I know that, why did I say that? I kind of took them through my reasoning, which was based on some of the Chinese political journals that were circulating in Hong Kong (I think I was the only person in the Consulate who was reading them), and also my discussions with contacts. I was right, by the way; Li did become prime minister eventually. I got to travel around the mainland a lot, sometimes on my own, other times with people from the China posts. Once there was an interesting diplomatic tour arranged by the China news agency in Hong Kong which at that time was China's de-facto diplomatic representation there. They arranged an interesting 10-day tour of Fujian province for Hong Kong-based diplomats. That was really interesting.

Q: What were you seeing?

HUHTALA: Well we saw the things they wanted us to see, of course, like factories and tea plantations, but they didn't keep an iron hand on us. An awful lot of migrants to Southeast Asia and to the United States have come from Fujian, so the local culture there fascinated me.

Q: That's a major, a couple of villages practically, populated California.

HUHTALA: Oh yes. They had this special economic zone on the coast called Xiamen, right near a place that use to be called Amoy in the imperial era. From the coast there you can see the islands of Quemoy and Matsu that were an important political issue in the 1950's. So we saw this sparkling economic zone with all its new factories, and then we toured the beautiful old brick town behind it. In the middle of that town was an old former U.S. consulate. Before 1949 the U.S. must have had 15 consulates in China. I was told that the caretaker there had stayed on after '49 because the last consular officer told him, "Here's the keys, you watch this place." He did, he watched it for 30 years. After our diplomats returned to China in the 1970s we finally discovered him and gave him some back pay.

Q: Were you seeing, if you're looking at the social things, the division between, was it becoming apparent between sort of the back country and the coast?

HUHTALA: Yeah, this was starting to emerge. This was during the first decade of Deng Xiaoping's rule, when he was saying to get rich is glorious; it was okay again to make money. It was the beginning of the proto-capitalism we see in China today. On my trips to the interior, for instance, I saw an awful lot of collectives and farm areas banding together to make factories to produce orange soda or something like that and start getting cash for it. They proudly showed me the refrigerators in their homes that they were able to buy now, and the TV set in the village that everybody would watch. It was really the beginning of China's startling economic boom which we are now having to deal with. Twenty years ago it started at that very local level.

Q: Were you looking at the old women in China? How was this going at that time?

HUHTALA: Well, you know officially women in China have always been equal. "Women hold up half the sky," said Mao. What I saw was that there were a lot more women doctors than in the West, and more women professionals, though they still had child care responsibilities just like they do everywhere else. In some ways their lot was significantly better than in the past, but a lot of this was rhetoric, not action.

Q: Were you seeing any results of the one child policy?

HUHTALA: Yes, we were beginning to see that, in the presence of a lot of little boys. We were worried at the time that the numbers were not looking so good for the little girls.

Q: They were still able at this point, were they using the ultra sound to determine if it was a boy or a girl or were they just getting rid of the girls?

HUHTALA: No, they were killing the girl babies. A lot of times that was what was happening. People were having clandestine babies. There was forced sterilization going on. At that time, I believe, they were a little bit more lenient on rural dwellers than they were on city folks. City folks were absolutely held to the One Child policy. In the countryside if your first child was a girl you could try for a boy. You could have one more but then that was it. Of course the tradition in China was to have as many kids as you could possibly squeeze out, so this was causing a lot of bitterness, a lot of unhappiness.

Q: I was talking to a friend of mine who served in China, he was saying China was producing any awful lot of spoiled kids. In a way I suppose they are well in their teens and twenties even early thirties now.

HUHTALA: Even then you saw a lot of chubby kids. They were being given as many sweets as they wanted. They were just totally spoiled. We visited kindergartens and they would be just gorgeously decked out; obviously very doted upon, these single kids.

Q: How were we feeling about China at this point? Was this a future giant and a menace or was this moving in the right direction?

HUHTALA: Remember this was before Tiananmen.

Q: Tiananmen was in '89.

HUHTALA: Yes, and this was a few years before that. This was when Hu Yaobang was in power. We were seeing a big upswing in student visa applications to the United States and we were taking them happily but we were also hoping that they were going to go back. We figured this would be a liberalizing influence on China. We thought that the trend towards capitalism was a good thing and something to be encouraged. Our companies were beginning to invest, though still not too many. I remember General Motors was in Shanghai. A few far-sighted companies were looking long term and seeing great opportunities. It was made very clear, you had to be an "old friend" a company had to be established as a friend of China to get anywhere. One can't come in today and expect to have a big concession tomorrow; maybe 10 years from now if you've been a good corporate citizen then you'll get that chance. The smart companies were investing for the long term.

There was a phenomenon that we noted in Hong Kong and we called it the cadre kids; a lot of the twenty-something children of the leadership, like children of Politburo members or military leaders were emerging with special privileges and lots of money to invest. The parents were called cadres, so we called these young entrepreneurs cadre kids. This was a generation removed from the old communist leadership, many of whom were on the Long March still and were supposedly ideological purists. Their kids, on the other hand, were heavily into business. They had huge companies flashy cars and all the accouterments, and were involved in a lot of corruption as well. This phenomenon, we thought, I believe accurately, was presaging a significant change in direction for the whole country.

Q: Corruption is endemic there.

HUHTALA: Especially a country like China that had endured so many tragedies, like the Great Leap Forward which just impoverished the whole country, leading to terrible famine in the late '50s. Then of course the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, which was an absolute disaster. All that was in living memory. I remember once I was riding on an overnight train in the middle of China, from Jiangsu to Guangzhou, or something like that. I struck up a conversation with a woman conductor who was really surprised that I could speak Chinese. (She gestured to everybody around and said, "Look at that, she talks." I felt like I was a talking dog or something.) But we did speak for awhile. I was in my 30s then and I thought she was probably in her 50s, from the look of her face, all the lines and everything. She was telling me about the Cultural Revolution and what had happened to her. Then I found out that her age: she was 38. It was just so sad, the things those people had to endure. So naturally when economic prosperity begins to occur in the '80s they went for it with gusto. It's understandable that there would be huge imbalances, that there would be corruption, that there would be people streaming in from the countryside, and indeed all of this has been the story for the last 20 years.

Q: Were we seeing a change in people who were coming out of China and Hong Kong at this point, were there fewer economic refugees, were they political refugees?

HUHTALA: There was still a fair amount of repression. We still had political refugees coming out. And there were very tight controls on migration. Hong Kong had very tight controls, and wouldn't let mainlanders just come in at will. What was more interesting to me, I think, was what was going on with the people who were in China. Especially Guangzhou (Canton), it's so close, just 50 miles or so from Hong Kong and they're the same people ethnically, all speaking Cantonese. Throughout that region there was a real stirring, a real dynamism and a real interest in making money. There was the new town of Shenzhen, which was built right on the border of the New Territories of Hong Kong and set up as a special economic zone.. I visited it in 1985. It was just a skeleton then, just a few building going up. Now it's a major metropolis and they're minting money - big hotels, big businesses.

Q: One of your portfolios was religion. What was happening religion wise in China?

HUHTALA: I was interested in both Protestant Christians and Catholics.

Q: How about, what's this other so called cult or something?

HUHTALA: Falun Gong. That did not exist yet. This was before Falun Gong arose and came to be viewed as such a threat by Beijing. Just parenthetically, I've seen this in other parts of the world too. If you try and have a society based on a total absence of religion it doesn't work. People need something. People will make it up if you don't give them something. You have to have something to organize your life around, at least most people do. In Hong Kong, we were very interested in the Catholic Church and the Protestants inside China. There was an official Catholic Church and an official Protestant Church run by the state. In the case of the Catholic Church it was divorced from Rome. They were not in communion with Rome; they weren't taking any advice on appointing bishops or anything else. But there was also a thriving culture of underground churches meeting in people's homes and trying to carry on their true religion as they saw it. There were some very senior priests and bishops who had been in prison for 20, 30 years. I was very interested in that and did some work through the church in Hong Kong. I got to talk to some of the people there and got in communication with Bishop Aloysius Jin of Shanghai who had just been released from prison after 25 years of hard labor on condition that he would not speak out against the Chinese authorities. Like several of them, he would eventually speak out and then get put back in prison, let out again and all of that. A very brave man, and a very holy man, probably.

Q: Is there anything else we should probably talk about your Hong Kong experience?

HUHTALA: You know I came away from that with a very strong conviction that China is going to be the big story for the next 50 years. At that time Deng Xiaoping was promising to quadruple the economy by the year 2000. In fact he did it by 1992. He just set off this chain of events that is just increasing geometrically. I still think what has been happening in China is the story of our lifetime, fascinating and very, very important. It is having profound effects on all the rest of Asia, which I dealt with in my last couple of years in the Service, and towards the United States as well. Even then there was a tendency in the United States to view China as an emerging opponent. That worried me then and it worries me even now.

Q: Sometimes you don't want to make an enemy just to have an enemy.

HUHTALA: Yes, you can create enemies where none exist.

Q: We'll pick this up in, when did you leave Hong Kong?

HUHTALA: I left Hong Kong in 1987.

Q: We'll pick it up then and ask, you know you've been having this backwards and forwards thing and having Chinese did this turn you into an incipient China hand or what was going to happen?

HUHTALA: We'll see.

Q: Today is the 4th of November 2005. Marie, well what were you thinking about in '87? You had been bouncing around a bit?

HUHTALA: Well no really, going back into China and to Hong Kong was a return to my roots really because of the Chiang Mai tour. I was thinking of myself as an Asia hand. I think I mentioned before even when I was in Chiang Mai in Thailand I was very conscious of the effect that China had had on the culture and the history of the region and I wanted to explore that. With that in mind the four years that I spent on the language and the country were of great interest to me.

Q: While you were doing this were there many books or reading about modern China, we're talking about '87 and how things were. Sort of the recovery from the Cultural Revolution and all that or did that come later?

HUHTALA: No, there were a lot of books in fact because, let's see Deng Xiaoping came to power I believe it was 1978 or so. Around '79 if I'm not mistaken he started the process of "opening doors," as he called it, so there was a flood of journalists that came in starting in the late '70s, early '80s. There were a lot of books out there. I remember a book by Fox Butterworth, for example. He was a New York Times reporter. There were quite a few journalistic type accounts of China. I also had done a lot of reading of the period around the wars of the nationalists and the classic period of Chinese history. There was no end of things to read and to try to understand.

Q: '87 what?

HUHTALA: In '87 I was offered the chance to go to the National War College as a student. That was a really interesting experience for me. I really felt after those four years of work on China that my focus had been fairly narrow. Even though the history of China is vast and it's very, very important it still is just one part of the world. I had the sense when I came to the War College that we were pulling the camera back a few steps and opening up the lens and looking at the whole world in a specifically strategic way.

Q: How did you find, you were there from '87 to '88. What kind of did you see your role as a State Department person there?

HUHTALA: I was trying to remember the exact numbers. I believe the student body was something around 275, 280 people. Of those only about 16 were from the State Department if I remember that correctly. Maybe 20 others were civilians from other agencies. We were a tiny minority in this overwhelmingly military organization. The military students were from the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines.

Q: Coast Guard too I think.

HUHTALA: There may have been one Coast Guard student then; it depended on the year. The Coast Guard is really under the Department of Treasury. The military students were at the lieutenant colonel or full colonel level or equivalent.

Q: You were at ICAF, is that right?

HUHTALA: No, the War College, NWC. It was really kind of interesting. In the beginning months they give us a lot of slide shows and briefings about the military capability of the U.S. Armed Forces. All that sexy weaponry, the laser-guided weapons, the smart bombs and all of that. I guess in 1987 they either had these in their inventory or they were preparing to get them.

Q: The ____ was brand new.

HUHTALA: It was very gee whiz. It was very sexy. This was still the last stages of the cold war and the nuclear deterrent was still very important. At the beginning of the year, the State Department students came into this feeling a bit alien and believing that the answer to most international political problems was going to be through negotiation. Our military colleagues, on the other hand, thought that we could just bomb anyone into submission whatever the problem was. By the end of that year we had had so much interchange between the diplomats and the soldiers that our positions largely reversed. We had a big exercise at the end of the year and State Department people were arguing for using some of these fancy weapons and the military guys were saying, "No, no, you've got to negotiate first."

Q: This is something that happens all the time in this. Part of the thing is that the military thinks oh my God, let's negotiate because they know the horrors of war and the State Department realizes that negotiation doesn't work all the time.

HUHTALA: The one thing that is very interesting is that we read Clausewitz, Machiavelli, Sun Tzu other great military theorists and we learned to view the military arm as only one of a range of policy options - essentially the last resort. You try to avoid having to sacrifice lives; you try and work problems out using other instruments of power like diplomacy or economic assistance or trade, that kind of thing. I think that was interesting to all of the students, wherever we came from.

Q: You went there before the next great military exercise which was the Gulf War in 1990. How was Vietnam viewed, there was a gap between the time you were there and when we pulled out in 1975?

HUHTALA: Of the male officers in my class, all but one of them had served in Vietnam. One young Marine lieutenant colonel had been just barely too young to have served there. He went on to a great career, making general officer, and he was a really good guy. People were teasing him because he didn't get to go to the show. Just ten years later there wasn't anybody in that school who had gone to Vietnam. It was a very unique kind of bubble of people.

I remember one time we were having a class discussion of the Vietnam war and its aftermath. This wasn't a full class, it was a committee session, must have been one of the courses I was taking on strategy; there would have been about 20 people sitting around the table. In fact the Commandant, the Navy Admiral who was the commandant at the school, happened to be sitting and observing our class that day. All the military men around the table expressed great bitterness about the way they had been received when they returned from that war. It had been a horrible war but they had done their duty and they came back to the American people and they were not treated with the respect and the hero status that they felt they deserved. They were very bitter about that. I was sitting there empathizing with them, and then they turned to the civilians in the room, of whom there were exactly two. They said, "Well, what did you think about it at the time, Marie?" I'd been in the class about five or six months now, I think we knew each other well and trusted each other so I felt I could be really honest. I said, "Well, during Vietnam I really thought that the military had lost its mind," and they looked at me in a moment of high tension. I said, "Bear in mind that I was in university in California, I didn't know then what I know now about what you all do and how your structure works but it just didn't seem to me that we were doing the right thing. There wasn't rhyme or reason for that war." They respected that opinion. They didn't share it, most of them I think, but it was a very interesting dialog that we were able to get into on that.

Q: You were there before we had so many women officers and the military didn't have many. Now they've got quite a few women in classes. How about the gender factor?

HUHTALA: There were several women in the State Department contingent, like maybe five or six of us, maybe more. Also in the military groupings there were women. Seems to me the Navy had the highest number of women, but there were also some Army women. It was still a small minority, obviously. I can understand that.

Q: Did you sense any reserve of the part of the male officers, were they still adjusting to this or not?

HUHTALA: I thought they were pretty cool about it. It didn't really pose any problems. They teased me. I teased them back. It was a very friendly sort of camaraderie.

Q: Were there any areas, in the first place, did you make a trip?

HUHTALA: Yes, we did.

Q: Where did you go?

HUHTALA: They encouraged us to sign up for a part of the world we didn't already know, so I signed up for the Middle East trip. We spent a year getting ready for it. We had special area studies classes and we did a lot of reading and work on the history and culture of that region. Our trip was to Egypt, Jordan and Israel. It was really interesting. Traditionally this trip was considered a plum because the Israeli armed forces always rolled out the red carpet for the War College delegation. They got great access, they got to see people at the very top, it was terrific. But the year we went, 1988, was the year of the first Intifada and Israel was kind of torn up by the resistance going on inside. The U.S. Administration, led by Secretary Schultz, had been putting a lot of pressure on the Israeli government to respond to the legitimate grievances of the Palestinians. They decided to show their pique at the U.S. by refusing to host the War College delegation. We didn't know this was coming so we crossed the Allenby Bridge from Jordan into Israel one fine day as expected and there were no hosts waiting for us. We cooled our heels for about an hour and a half until we could get somebody from the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem to come and get us. We were informed that our visit was off. The excuse given was that this was the 40th anniversary of Israeli independence. Basically they just decided to send a signal using this trip, very unfortunate in some ways. We didn't just turn tail and leave, however, we hired guides, and we visited Mount Masada, the Golan Heights, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. We didn't get to go into the old city of Jerusalem, which was a great disappointment to me, because of the Intifada. We learned about the country from the U.S. country team and from our tour guides and bus drivers. We got probably a very different message than what the Israelis had been intending for us to get.

Q: This is of course been one of the Israelis' prime weapons, particularly with a congressional delegation and military things you overwhelm, the Taiwanese do the same thing. You wonder at the so called diplomatic gestures because all it does is leave a bunch of people who may later be in positions of authority with a bad taste in their mouth.

HUHTALA: Absolutely. We had future general officers in our group plus a couple future ambassadors. It was interesting, it really was. There were a couple of other really interesting things about that year. One was the great strategic question we were grappling with for that academic year, which was: Should the U.S. encourage Gorbachev in his perestroika or was it all an elaborate plot to fool us? I must say the majority opinion in the class was that it was probably a commie plot. Throughout the year we had good speakers; the War College always gets fantastic speakers. We were challenged to think the big thoughts. It was a great experience.

Q: It is one of these things where any time somebody thinks there is a plot with a large country doing it the answer is it's not because the country can't do it.

HUHTALA: Maybe I'm over simplifying what they were saying.

Q: No, but I mean this was a thought process that was going on.

HUHTALA: I was surprised they were even posing the question, should we encourage Gorbachev or not. I thought that was a very interesting and rather weird question to be posing.

Q: The big enchilada was the Soviet Union at the time. Were you getting people in your group beginning to see the tremendous weaknesses of the system?

HUHTALA: I don't think that was fully evident to anybody till after the Soviet Union fell. I don't think you would have found any analysts in the U.S. government who really could have told you that in 1987 or 1988.

Q: This of course in a way the tremendous intelligence failure which includes analysis failure including the Department of State in not seeing, here is a country about to basically collapse.

HUHTALA: With hindsight you can see that perestroika was a last-ditch attempt to salvage the old Soviet system. People didn't see that at the time, hence the question.

Q: We have this fancy intelligence apparatus and all of our people reporting. I've talked to people way before this happened, everybody was talking about how things didn't work there, yet at the same time somehow or another the idea of a collapse was just not there. It makes you wonder. There's sort of a conventional thought process takes over and it was everywhere.

HUHTALA: As I say, it was difficult to assess what was really going on there. It was obviously one of the central questions of the day. How were we going to respond to this? The other side was moving in a way that we didn't quite understand. We still heard all the traditional doctrine about the large-scale land war that we were geared up for in Europe, the Fulda Gap and all of that. We had a lot of field trips around the country, including one to Minot Air Force Base where we got to go down into the ICBM silos and see how that was set up. The Cold War was still very, very real when I was there. It was very interesting. I found then as I have found consistently, up to this day really, that the whole reality of East Asia, even China, even Japan, was a very minor part of the presentations that we got and in the thinking of the people at the War College. Yes, they were out there but Asia was viewed as a long term issue, a late 21st century issue or something. That was not at all the perspective I had after four years of doing China. So I thought that was kind of revealing. The curriculum had almost nothing devoted to East Asia, very little.

Q: Were they talking about, well China's military potential, actually at the time there really wasn't much potential there.

HUHTALA: Potential yes, of course potential but not actuality. No, because Deng Xiaoping had deliberately said China would undergo to have four modernizations and the military would be the last one. First they were going to feed their people, get the economy on its feet and re-enter the world trading system. So now, two decades later, as they are building up their military I'm amused at all the great thinkers in Washington who are just horrified by this. Well, hello, any great nation has to have a military and they told us 25 years ago they were going to do this. It's never been a secret.

Q: What was your impression of the military officers you were serving with?

HUHTALA: I respected them very, very much. At first it was like two alien cultures coming together. I had had almost no contact with the military up to that time. I car pooled with several officers and got to know a lot of them on a personal basis. They had had very little exposure to diplomats, as well. The lack of comprehension was mutual. I began to understand how people in the military think, how their system is structured and the way they approach problems. Early in the year we all took the Meyers Briggs personality test (my first time), and I found out that the vast majority of State Department people are intuitive thinkers and the vast majority of the military are sensors, i.e., more comfortable with facts and figures than intuition. It's kind of broad-brush, but I think there is something to this. You can see the difference of approach. I'm really glad I had that year because virtually every thing I've done since then has involved a lot of close work with the military.

Q: This is an extremely valuable time. I was in a senior seminar and frankly our exposure, we had an officer from each of the services, but it wasn't the same thing. Of course my generation, we'd all been in the military ourselves. Not very exalted, I was an airman first class but I spent four years and I studied the military and I lived in a military town so I kind of knew the culture basically, the Navy culture. The people coming after me hadn't gone into the military and I've often felt that the senior seminar was good but probably the exposure to the military at one of the War Colleges much more important.

HUHTALA: It's kind of dangerous that such a large segment of our society now has never had contact with the military in any kind of field, no meaningful contact. Our military officers pretty much stay in their own career path too and don't have a lot of contact with the rest of society. It's not really healthy.

Q: That's not good. It goes back to other societies that had the same problem of keeping the military off to one side and letting them fight the wars. It's very evident in Congress for example, so few of our leaders have, one, had military experience or two had their children have military experience.

HUHTALA: Even in Vietnam the political leadership had all had World War Two experience. It wasn't as stark as it is now. It's true. There's something else I remember from that. We started this War College year a few months after the raid on Tripoli. Remember we talked about Chad and Libya? Well, the two squadron leaders who conducted that raid were in our class. One of them was in my car pool, an Air Force lieutenant colonel, just bright as a button. One day they gave us a presentation on what that was like because they flew out of their base in England all the way down to Tripoli. Of course the French wouldn't let them over-fly their territory, so they had to go around, they had to go way out into the Atlantic Ocean and then come over the Straits of Gibraltar and fly over the Mediterranean, bomb Tripoli and turn right around and come back. They couldn't even land. They said it was like 14 hours, they were flying these little fighter jets with mid-air refuelling the whole way. So it was 14 hours of incredible boredom and keeping yourself awake, boredom, boredom and then all of a sudden, intense activity, combat! Then turn around and 14 more hours going back. It was spellbinding to hear their account of what that was like.

Q: On that, at the time I interviewed a man who was a political appointee but in NATO. He was fairly far up. He was telling his wife that they're having dinner at the French Embassy and everybody was giving toasts and he was tempted, he didn't, but he felt like toasting, "I want to thank the British for the tremendous support that they gave us on this and I'd like to compliment the French on their cuisine."

HUHTALA: On this raid you mean.

Q: He decided not to, it was not diplomatic.

HUHTALA: Goes back a long way.

Q: Did you get any feel from the people talking about cooperation or feeling towards other militaries, in NATO or?

HUHTALA: Oh yes, sure. Many of them had served in Germany, for instance. The NDU itself has an international fellows program so we had, I don't know, a dozen or so military officers from friendly countries. Some of my colleagues, a few, had been military attaches. Others would do so eventually. They need to have a fairly senior rank actually to be a military attaché. A lot of them had international experience but again it was living in a U.S. base in a place like Germany, or Japan or Korea.

Q: After this military experience you took your M-16 and where did you go?

HUHTALA: I went back to the Department. For the next two years I was in our personnel bureau. I was the Director of East Asian Assignments in CDA; it got me back into my East Asia bureau even though I was in personnel.

Q: Well personnel assignment, I've had one and this is really a very, unlike most organizations, personnel is a really driving force. For us these assignments are absolutely important.

HUHTALA: Oh they are critical.

Q: In civil service it's more routine, almost a clerical thing but for us this is almost at the heart of policy. How did you find this?

HUHTALA: I had had my eye on this job for a number of years because when you are the director of assignments for a region you really are the regional bureau's person in personnel. You work very closely with the leadership, in my case, of the EAP bureau, to get for them the best candidates, the candidates they really want for their jobs, both domestically and overseas. I met lots and lots of people. There are quite a few mid-level officers now who remember me when they were junior and starting out and I helped them get into a good job in EAP. I don't remember all the details but they come up and say, "Oh Marie, you really saved me, you got me that language training," or whatever. My biggest challenges were staffing the China posts because it takes two years to train someone in Chinese so you have to fill those jobs way in advance ; moreover, China was still a difficult place to live and work in, much more so than it is now, though it remains challenging. We had, I think, the embassy in Beijing plus four consulates. So there were lots and lots of positions to fill with people who have the requisite language skills so that they will be successful when they arrive, more than two years after we make the assignment. While I was in that job, in June 1989, the crises of Tiananmen took place, and a lot of our people evacuated. I served on the task force at one point. Really that just disappointed me so much. It was so sad because when I was in Hong Kong working on China there was a period of opening up, of exchanges and free travel into the country and new intellectual stirrings. All of that kind was clamped down on after Tiananmen.

Q: You were in East Asia bureau, what was the consensus, it's not like an absolute failure of leadership, this thing could have been nipped in the bud. Some concessions made and do something.

HUHTALA: Well I wasn't in EAP; I was in Personnel so I didn't get the inside skinny on what the Assistant Secretary was thinking or anything. But it looked very much as if Zhao Ziyang had been edged aside. The whole thing started when Hu Yaobang died, with student remembrances of Hu; Zhao was a modernizer and the intellectual heir to both Hu and Mao, except he was a much smarter guy. He was the voice for continuing moderation and he was squelched by the hardliners.

Q: What did this do to our staff there?

HUHTALA: It had a profound effect because we went to ordered departure for all family members. In China we had several tandem couples with children. That is, couples where both husband and wife were embassy officers and they had to make a choice whether the husband would leave with the kids or the wife depending on their own personal situation. They had to weigh the relative importance of their jobs: in once case both spouses were considered essential employees but one of them decided to leave with the children anyways. It was very tough for them. At one point there was firing into the compound where most of our employees lived; that was very unnerving.

Q: I see, there was real danger.

HUHTALA: There absolutely was.

Q: Some of the firing I take it was kind of deliberate at least on the part of_____.

HUHTALA: I've never known whether people were just taking it out on our people or what, but it was highly unsafe so we had to get folks out. I think they only stayed away about a month and then they were able to go back in. This was not just in Beijing. Guangzhou also had to evacuate, as did Shanghai. I don't know about the other two consulates (Chengdu and Shenyang).

Q: You mentioned two years training. The thing about any language is we know that at the FSI just by its nature we started too late. We should start before people reach puberty practically. We know the sooner you start language training in age the better a person is and to a certain point the brain wiring gets fixed in place and doesn't work very well. What was sort of the rule of thumb you were dealing with?

HUHTALA: We went by the MLAT, the Modern Language Aptitude Test scores and I don't remember the number but we had a cut off of around maybe 55 or 60 on an 80-point scale. We also tried to find people with proven language learning skills in the past. That's nice and theoretical, but when you've got all those positions to fill in a difficult country you sometimes end up bending the rules. Basically if someone was willing, if they came forward and volunteered to take two years of Chinese, we often assigned them. Unfortunately that meant once in awhile we got somebody who would never make it, who was just looking for two years of living the easy life or something. It didn't happen very often but I remember at least one or two cases. I believe that was right around the time the Department extended the time in class rules for long term language study so that was an incentive for people to try something like Chinese. The vast majority of people put through that training did their very best and became China hands, went back for repeat tours, which is what you need.

Q: Were you in competition with Japanese hands, Indonesian hands? Was the personnel sort of divided off into these various country groups?

HUHTALA: Yes, of course. We had three of the four super-hard languages to learn in the East Asia region, Chinese, Japanese and Korean, the fourth being Arabic. For these super-hard languages people sign up for two years, one year at FSI and the second year out in one of the field schools. Once they make that commitment, and spend two years studying a hard language, people tend to make that their primary foreign language, although we do have a few stars who have combined both Japanese and Chinese or Korean and Japanese, for example. It happens, but it's rare. That's a very different situation from the people who studied the Southeast Asian languages, Indonesia, Thai, Vietnamese, and Cambodian. Those are one-year languages. You do all of the training here at FSI and then you go out. It's not as difficult, but you have essentially a one-country language, whereas with Chinese at least you can use that in a number of countries. Japanese and Korean you can't. It's tough. It's really tough to get people to go for these languages. Back in the late '80s we had a lot of attractive European posts. We also had many African posts which had very high hardship differentials so people would be interested in going there. Then we had the Spanish speakers who had all of Latin America for potential assignments. We had to get out there and really hustle and recruit people to go to Asia. I used to have officers say to me, "Oh EAP is a closed bureau. It's very clubby. You keep assigning the same people over and over again." I used to say, "There is a golden road into EAP with a beautiful arch over the front of it welcoming you in, and it's called hard language training. Sign up and take one of our hard languages and that will get you in the door."

Q: Unlike the European bureau where it's really who you knew.

HUHTALA: That's what I hear.

Q: How did you feel about the personnel system?

HUHTALA: You know I think it's much maligned for the wrong reasons. I think there's huge elements of fairness built right into it. At that time, (they've changed the organization since then) there were two divisions in CDA. The assignments officers acted on behalf of the Bureaus recruiting people for their jobs and the personnel counsellors worked with individual officers to help them find jobs that best suited their talents and career development. There was kind of a creative tension between these two branches. Every week we would have an inter-functional panel where we'd sit around a big oval table in a conference room and hash this out. Most of the time the assignments had been brokered in advance so there wasn't a whole lot of controversy, but sometimes we would have what we called a shoot-out. Say the Bureau wanted Candidate X and the political division really thought that Candidate Y should be given a chance to go to that job; we would each make our case, we'd lay out our points and then there would be discussion followed by a vote. There were 13 people sitting around the table, one of whom was the person who looked out for equal employments rights, they called her the continuity counsellor. With 13 votes, you never had a tie. It was high drama sometimes but this really gave every officer a chance to have his or her case made. I think there is a belief out there in the Foreign Service that the Bureaus just pick their favourites and Joe Blow from another part of the Service doesn't have a chance. That's really not true.

Q: The real problem of course often is that people who serve as staff aides to people of high rank up in the 7th floor seem to be able to manipulate the system one way or another. Did you notice that?

HUHTALA: There were one or two attempts but you know the system was pretty resistant to that. If the Bureau didn't want them, even if the Secretary of State or some very high-level person was trying to press you to assign them Personnel would not just roll over and do it. We would have very intense debates about it, particularly if the candidate lacked the appropriate grade or experience. It happened once or twice that the Secretary tried to direct an assignment, and we pushed back, though in at least one instance, the Secretary got his way.

Q: You mentioned the equal opportunities person. I would think particularly in those posts the real equal opportunity I guess both minorities and women. I wouldn't think this would be much of an issue anymore at the time you were there.

HUHTALA: The EEO person at the time was not very concerned with women, it was primarily minorities. When I first came into the Foreign Service there were so few women but by the late '80s the classes coming in had between 25 and 50% women. Now they all have at least 50% women. There has been a huge intake over the years.

Q: Well the fact I'm sitting here interviewing you. At one point I was really scrambling to find women that retired and now it's so routine that it no longer is an issue. Were you sort of pressured to take so and so because they were a minority even though they weren't as qualified as someone else?

HUHTALA: No, it was never like that but there was a lot of pressure on the regional bureaus to take more qualified minority applicants. Again, I was in the position of trying to recruit them. I always felt there was something wrong about this picture because the Foreign Service personnel system is a closed system. If I'm recruiting for FSO-1 officers there's only so many of them in the pool and they all would have had to have joined 10 to 15 years earlier; it's not like I could go out to a majority black college and recruit somebody to come in and take a job at that level. No, officers have to come in the entry level. If we had a qualified black or Asian or Hispanic bid on one of our jobs we would rejoice in it. We would try very hard to get them to take the job, almost always. The problem was, perceptions being what they were, most of our bidders on EAP jobs were white males and most of the jobs were held by white males. In fact when I was lobbying for my next job in the Bureau, I got an assignment as a deputy office director, although it was not easy. I had to fight off a couple of white males who wanted it. In the end actually, ironically, my main competition was another white woman. The leadership of the Bureau at the time said, "By golly, we should be taking people like Marie who have experience in the region and are females because it's going to help our overall picture." I think the burden was very much felt by the regional bureaus. It's just that there weren't enough minority people to go around, basically.

Q: This brings up another case. We've never had, things may have changed now, but we didn't have a significant number of Asian Americans coming into the Foreign Service yet when you think about these are the people who often are at the top of most classes. The boat person who came in and three years later is the valedictorian of his or her high school. What about, let's say you had a Chinese American or a Korean American, was there reservations about assigning them to China or Korea?

HUHTALA: Only perhaps by Diplomatic Security (DS). Getting a security clearance has been hard at times for those who have living relatives in those countries. In my experience the majority of Asian Americans serving in East Asia - and that's a number that has been growing - enjoy their assignments, just as Hispanic Americans like serving in Latin America. African Americans like going to Africa to the point where they have to stop and think, "My God, am I type-casting myself? Maybe I should be reaching out to a different bureau." This was happening in our Service but I think the first impulse in the early years, like in the '80s, would have been to stay in one's heritage region. Certainly for those who already have the language it could be advantageous to do so.

Q: Did you find yourself working with some of the other bureaus to say, okay I've got a China hand but this has been maybe the third post or something. Maybe I should advise them. This is not career-enhancing, but the counsellor to say, "Why don't you try a European or a Latin American. You get a little different perspective."

HUHTALA: That would be a counsellor function. But I did have counsellors call me up and say, "Look, I've got Mr. Jones here who has had several tours in Latin America but he is very interested in Asia and he's really good. Will you take a look at him?" I would say, "Yes, especially if he's willing to learn a hard language." Later on when I became a DCM, I consciously looked for people outside of the narrow EAP circle because EAP did have this reputation of being very clubby and closed off, which is not healthy. I recruited one terrific tandem couple, for instance, with experience in the new central Asian republics, to come to Bangkok; they both did very well.

Q: You left in what '89?

HUHTALA: No, I left Personnel in mid-1990.

Q: So after Tiananmen. Did things stop at Tiananmen?

HUHTALA: No, no, as I said people were evacuated for about a month, then they went back to post. It became harder to recruit people to go there because of all that violence, obviously. Then things kind of settled down. Tiananmen really was not about China-U.S. relations of course, it was a domestic problem. There were still a lot of motivators on both sides to keep the relationship moving forward. It hasn't been easy but you know we have managed to do it.

Q: You left before I guess the whole State Department personnel system began to feel the real impact and the opening into Europe. I mean the former Soviet Union. Tremendous strain on the personnel system.

HUHTALA: 13 new embassies.

Q: Yeah, and Secretary Baker, to my mind that's a real blot on his record.

HUHTALA: He went to the Hill and turned down offers of additional funding for those new embassies, saying we could take it out of "fat." I think that was a critical mistake; funding was extremely tight through the '90s and recruitment of new officers fell off dramatically.

Q: Other things were performing exceptionally well.

HUHTALA: The '90s was a very difficult time.

Q: Where did you go in '90?

HUHTALA: I wanted to get back into the Bureau. I had never yet served at the EAP bureau domestically, only overseas, so I pursued a job as a deputy director of a large country desk. There were several deputy director jobs open. The one that I was attracted to was Vietnam. Laos, Cambodia, called EAP/VLC. I knew the director and I interviewed with him. (He'd served in Bangkok when I'd been in Chiang Mai.) He said, "Well, Marie, I'd like to take you but they also want me to look at this other person who's been up on the P staff." That candidate was another woman and it looked as if it wasn't going to happen for me. I went actually to the EAP executive director, with whom I'd been working all this time while I was in personnel, and said, "Look, I really want to work in the Bureau. I'm an O-1 and that's the kind of job I should have." He went into the Bureau's Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, who like in most bureaus made the final personnel decisions, and said, "You've got to give my assignments person a good job." He went to bat for me. In the end I got that job and the other woman went to be deputy on the Korea desk and everybody was happy.

Q: You were doing Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia from 1990 to when?

HUHTALA: To 1992.

Q: Let's do a little round up of relations with each of these countries.

HUHTALA: Oh God, what a job that was. The only country of the three that we had a diplomatic relationship with, and that just barely, was Laos. We had our little embassy, which had hung on in Vientiane through the darkest days of the Vietnam war and the Pathet Lao take-over of the government. It was headed by a chargé d'affaires and its staff was severely constrained by the paranoia of the government there. It was a tiny little embassy.

Q: I'm interviewing Terry Tull now.

HUHTALA: Yes, she had the chargé job right before I came into VLC. Her successor was Charlie Salmon, who had just gone out there as chargé. So much for Laos. Cambodia was just emerging from the long nightmare of the Khmer Rouge era. A peace process was in play in Paris, and while I was in that job Secretary James Baker led our delegation to the signing of a peace agreement. This in turn resulted in the introduction of a UN (United Nations) force to go into Cambodia as peacekeepers.

Q: Pol Pot was still around, wasn't he?

HUHTALA: That's right. And we were trying to help nurture the beginning of civil society in Cambodia. As if those issues weren't interesting enough, we had Vietnam. At that point we had still not re-established diplomatic relations following the war, which had ended 15 years before. There had been attempts in the late '70s to negotiate something but there were two problems. One was that the Vietnamese were demanding war reparations, which we never pay, and the second thing was that in 1979, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and that put an end to any interest on the U.S. side in normalizing. During the 1980s there developed a potent movement of the POW/MIA families, which strongly opposed normalization.

Q: Missing in action. These are people who were concerned that there might be military men still prisoners of war.

HUHTALA: Let me just preface this. After every major war there are huge numbers of people who are never accounted for. Their remains are never found and their families never know what happened to them. After World War II something like 400,000 men were never accounted for, and after the Korean War there were 88,000. Those were wars that we considered ourselves to have won, or at least to have come out all right on. In the case of Vietnam, of course, we did not win that war, and there were some 20,000 or so Americans in the three countries, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Americans who had been lost and never recovered.

As a result there was a strong movement led by the National League of Families of POW/MIA to demand accountability. Many in that movement believed that there were huge stores of U.S. remains that the Vietnamese had and were cynically withholding from warehouses full of remains, they believed. Others, kind of fringe people, believed that there were still live Americans being held in the jungles of Southeast Asia. As long as there were such powerful emotions churned up by these families, with whom everybody sympathized after all, the two governments couldn't make any progress on normalizing relations. During the 1980s, long before Washington and Hanoi were ready to do anything, President Reagan sent his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General John Vessey, to Vietnam to begin a dialog on looking for at least the remains of our missing men. That effort took root. We were beginning to conduct joint operations for recovery of remains, not only in Vietnam but also in Cambodia and Laos. In exchange for that, which we had proposed to Vietnam as a purely humanitarian effort to address the suffering of family members in the U.S., the Vietnamese came back and said, "Well, we have humanitarian issues too. Our country was destroyed during the war. We don't have health facilities, and we're very poor." Thus the State Department was pressed into service to respond to Vietnam's humanitarian needs. The way that worked out, my predecessor as deputy director of EAP/VLC started this effort.

Q: Who was this?

HUHTALA: Michael Marine, our current ambassador to Vietnam. Anyway, he organized this effort to rally all the big American voluntary organizations, NGOs, and interested individuals to offer assistance to Vietnam. We worked with Treasury to simplify the process for getting licenses to give aid to Vietnam (necessary because the embargo was still in place) and then led delegations every year or so to meet with Vietnamese foreign ministry officials and describe to them what we were doing to fill our side of the equation. So that is the job that I inherited. I went with Michael the last time he went to Hanoi, right before I started on the job, in June of 1990, and saw how it worked. The President of the League of Families of POW/MIA, Ann Mills Griffiths, was also on the delegation. It was very clear what the quid pro quo was our humanitarian assistance in exchange for their cooperation on recovery of remains. And many wonderful American organizations had stepped up to the plate with great generosity. We had veterans groups building clinics in Vietnam, Save the Children was very active there, Operation Smile went to Vietnam regularly to perform operations on children with cleft palate. There was a lot to work with, actually.

Q: Also how about we had the Voluntary Departure Program dealing with boat people. How did that go?

HUHTALA: That had been going on all through the '80s actually, based out of Bangkok. This was a process whereby we were trying to effect family reunification for people whose families made it out as boat refugees, with Vietnam cooperating in the interviewing and credentialing of these people to come to the United States as refugees. This was a very long and drawn-out process. That had been our only link with Vietnam during all those years first ODP and then POW/MIA work.

Q: When you got there in 1990 was there the feeling that okay, we're going to have relations, I mean you didn't feel that?

HUHTALA: No, there was more to it than that. There was interest on both sides in having diplomatic relations but I think both sides saw that there were huge obstacles, the largest being the POW/MIA issue, but also just a huge wall of mistrust on both sides. There were several things that happened. Vietnam had an Ambassador in New York accredited to the United Nations, so we had a channel for dialogue. One very important step was a congressional delegation that was put together of Vietnam vets in the congress. Senator John Kerry, Senator John McCain, Congressman John Rhodes, Congressman Tom Carper, and others (I can't remember all the names) - about eight or ten members of the House and Senate travelled to Vietnam, the first Congressional group to do so since the war, to explore the possibility of having relations. They were well received, not lavishly but seriously. That kind of broke the ice. Then they came back and Senator Patrick Leahy put into law a provision whereby we could offer humanitarian assistance to victims of war, specifically prosthetics, in Vietnam and other countries. There was a huge need in Vietnam for prosthetics and assistance to adults children who were war victims, and Leahy set aside about a million dollars a year for Vietnam. That was a very positive step on the part of the United States government. Then Kerry and McCain created a Special Select Committee on Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia to investigate the reports of live POWs and withheld remains in Vietnam. It was a very big deal, highly publicized, it went on for half a year or more. The Committee interviewed everybody and anybody who had anything to say on this issue, including the people who believed in the tiger cages and people who believed in the warehouse full of remains. The State Department was tasked to provide boxes and boxes of documents on the issue, including years' worth of telegrams that we had to declassify and send over. We did, we just emptied out our archives. They went through every piece of paper and heard all kinds of testimony. At the end of this period, that Select Committee was able to declare that there was no reasonable evidence for any existing prisoners still being held in Southeast Asia and Vietnam was making (I don't remember the exact terminology) good faith efforts to help us find the remains, including the many, many joint recovery missions in which they had cooperated very well with us.

So because all this was happening, in the spring of 1992, the Administration, State, Defense, the National Security Council together with the director of the League of Families, hammered out a road map to normalization of relations with Vietnam. By hammered out, I mean they were in the office of EAP/VLC till ten o'clock p.m. the night before the road map was presented to the Vietnamese Ambassador to the UN. It was the craziest document I had ever seen. It was quickly leaked by the Vietnamese so it's out there, it is public knowledge. It had four phases and each phase was very heavily weighted toward action on their part. For instance, in stage one, it said Vietnam shall do the following: open up their archives, conduct a large number of joint recovery activities, persuade the Cambodian government to sign the peace agreement calling for a United Nations peacekeeping force, and persuade Cambodia and Laos to cooperate in tri-lateral talks with us. In other words, these were huge things. If they did all of that then America would allow direct phone links with Vietnam. Then in phase two there was another long list of very difficult things for Vietnam to do in exchange for which we would allow American businesses to set up offices in Vietnam. Finally in phase three, we would stop voting against them in international financial institutions like the World Bank, and finally in phase four we would lift the embargo, establish liaison offices in each other's capitals and begin to normalize. I believe the opponents of moving forward were convinced we would never get past phase one or two. The Vietnamese, I think, swallowed hard and did all the things that was on the list for them to do. (By this time I had moved on to my next assignment. It was in 1994 that we had to lift the embargo, despite the political difficulties that created in Washington. In 1995 we established diplomatic relations with Vietnam.)

Q: While you were there were you running into sort of the bone trade in Thailand? I've talked to people who'd been involved particularly in Thailand but I mean there was a whole culture of swindlers essentially who were.

HUHTALA: Dog tags coming in. We had an office in the embassy in Bangkok that was devoted exclusively to that, just sifting through all this information. Eventually when they had our missions open in Vietnam they still get dog tags. People thought that if they presented a set of dog tags to the American authorities, they would get a reward or a visa. Unfortunately, many of them were faked, and in any case dog tags alone don't establish anything about the fate of a missing soldier.

Q: You still see the South Vietnamese flag flying here. Did you in your dealing with the League of Families and all, there must have been some people who were almost fanatics on the thing. Something like this, no rational explanation or logic will sway them.

HUHTALA: You have to feel sorry for these people because it is very traumatic to have lost your father, your brother, your son and never know what happened. This is really, really hard. So I always tried to keep that in mind. But some of them were just implacably refusing to ever agree to normalizing with Vietnam. We can't trust them they would say, we can't believe anything they say, don't give them an inch, they'll take a mile, we should never normalize. That's crazy. That just doesn't make sense. We normalized with Germany and with Japan after World War II. At some point you have to put it behind you for the sake of national interests. Some of those people I believe to this day are not prepared to see that happen. There was just a huge amount of emotion even as, through all this time, we were getting increasingly sophisticated forensic methods.

Q: DNA was really beginning to come on line.

HUHTALA: The U.S. Army has a Central Investigation Laboratory in Hawaii, CILHI. I visited it several times. It's fascinating what they can do. Even now they are getting 50-year old sets of remains out of Korea and identifying them using mitochondrial DNA. But if you're a family member and your loved one has been lost for 20 years in Vietnam and the Army gives you remains that they say they've positively identified but it's just a tooth or a finger bone, for example, that's not very satisfying emotionally. It's hard. It's just hard.

Q: Could you talk a bit about what you did, let's say we're coming up with the four points in that treaty, what was our role, your role?

HUHTALA: This was the most demanding job I had had up to that point. As deputy director I had to run the office, I had to make sure, that the three or four desk officers and two secretaries were working efficiently, make sure the work flow was proceeding as it should, make sure that papers for the Assistant Secretary or higher levels were tasked on time, and they had to be letter perfect. Unfortunately, I'd be kicking them back to the officers all the time for revisions. There was a huge amount of paperwork coming up because there was a lot of work to be done in supporting the Cambodian peace process which our assistant secretary, Richard Solomon was deeply involved in. The Secretary of State went to Paris with it for the signing of the treaty, as I mentioned. Then as the Vietnam normalization process came on line there was an increasing number of policy papers and decision memos to be worked. There was all of that mechanical stuff, plus a lot of dealings with the League of Families, and with Vietnamese diplomats coming through. Then I kept in touch with all of these charitable organizations and I travelled to Vietnam maybe two times a year to keep that process going. I also did a lot of public speaking, particularly to Vietnamese-American groups, most of whom were implacably opposed to normalization. A lot of them were former refugees, and they'd be flying the old Saigon flag in their hall, though I wouldn't go in there until they took it down.

Q: About once a week I go eat at the Eden Center here in Arlington and the South Vietnamese flag is everywhere, in fact a big one flying, there it is. It will be a cool day in hell before they put up the flag of the Republic of Vietnam.

HUHTALA: I imagine they never will. As a U.S. government representative I couldn't be there endorsing that. We had to draw a line, absolutely. All in all, it was really an exhausting job with very long hours, but oh man, I learned so much. It was great.

Q: The Vietnamese groups, will they listen to you really or?

HUHTALA: Yes, they would. These were the more responsible groups obviously. There were some sterling examples of people who'd come here with nothing but the clothes on their back and they'd become wealthy businessmen and made a life here. They wanted to have U.S. policy explained to them and they wanted to have a say in the shaping of it, in the best American tradition.

Q: Was there a push on their part to say, okay this is over we want to be able to go back and see our family?

HUHTALA: Some of them did.

Q: And be safe.

HUHTALA: And make money. There are huge riches potentially available for our large population of overseas Vietnamese in this country. Many do go back every year. Others didn't want us to ever talk to those dirty commies. Most people I met were somewhere in between.

Q: Were you getting any feel for what was going on in Vietnam at the time?

HUHTALA: Some. We had our ODP (Orderly Departure Program) people going in to interviews potential refugees. And there were all these NGOs travelling in and out. I was in frequent contact with them. There were left-wing political groups that were militating for the restoration of ties, that kind of thing. There were educational exchanges beginning. So we were beginning to get a good sense of what it was like inside Vietnam; it wasn't a mystery or closed off or anything.

Q: Did you have much contact with Vietnamese officials?

HUHTALA: Sometimes when they came down from New York to Washington for talks, and of course when I went to Hanoi.

Q: We weren't under the restraints that we had with something at one point with the PLO, Palestine Liberation or Cubans. Could you talk to the Vietnamese officials sort of openly?

HUHTALA: At that time, during those two years, it was still relatively constrained. In their official role it had to be arranged in advance. One thing that was really helpful was while I was in that job there was a Vietnamese Foreign Ministry official who came on a six-month program with SAIS. His name was Le Van Bang and he was just there as a student. We knew he was a Vietnamese diplomat, he was their Western Hemisphere guy. He'd been an expert on Cuba and now he was being retrained to be an expert on America. During his time as a student some of us got to know him in a non-official way. I once invited him to an office party at my house. He remembers it to this day because he eventually, years later, became their first ambassador to Washington. Now he is a vice foreign minister in Hanoi and the leading proponent of continuing to improve relations with United States. I really think that six months period was seminal in bringing him around, and his influence has been far-reaching.

Q: Was it difficult for him to get our approval as well as.

HUHTALA: No, we were giving visas at that point in the early '90s, particularly for educational exchange programs like those of the IIE.

Q: International Educational Exchange?

HUHTALA: Yes, and the Ford Foundation. They were bringing select Vietnamese over to this country as they do in China and in other places. It was so helpful because it was beginning to break down these walls of misunderstanding and ignorance, the mutual flaws that existed.

Q: Sort of looking at Vietnam at the time did we see, you know the Soviet Union was imploding, did we see sort of the communist glue beginning to lose its effectiveness or something in Vietnam?

HUHTALA: Oh gosh. The Vietnamese Communist Party was still pretty much a Leninist organization, very highly controlled, very hierarchical. As an Asia hand, I also quickly perceived the Confucian nature of the society and the strong continuity between Vietnam and China and Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Am I making myself clear? It still had the formal structure of a Leninist party and everything.

Q: Were we looking and sort of comparing the political situation in Vietnam with the last years of the Soviet Union saying okay the party in Vietnam is maybe got two or three decades and then it will go?

HUHTALA: No, I don't think we were making that leap. We were very interested when the Russians withdrew from Cam Ranh Bay and it became open again. It's a beautiful port. We've still not really gone and taken advantage of it. I think what really good observers were doing was comparing Vietnam with China. China, in 1990, had had 12 years of opening up, which was beginning already to transform the country and make it more economically successful. There they were already facing the contradictions of trying to open up economically and not open politically. We saw that Vietnam was beginning to go down that same path. I still think that's a more apt comparison really than with Russia.

Q: How did you see relations with China at the time?

HUHTALA: We had normalized by then. In fact we had been, we normalized at the end of the '70s. We had all those embassies and all those posts. We were still negotiating some very difficult trade issues for instance and human rights was becoming a big item on the agenda with China. Basically I think we were watching this transformation, unsure whether it was going to really hold and what was going to happen. The coastal cities were developing very, very fast, while the hinterland was very backward.

Q: Did we see China and Vietnam as being essentially antagonistic towards each other?

HUHTALA: They'd had a border war and that was in -

Q: The '80s wasn't it, no that was fairly close after we left, in the late '70s.

HUHTALA: No, Vietnam invaded Cambodia in '79 and then I think it was maybe '79 or '80 they had a border war. They had a thriving business trade back and forth. If you went into the markets in Hanoi back then, in 1990, they were full of plastic products and things like that from China. The architecture of northern Vietnam reminded me forcefully of southern China. The way the houses were shaped and everything, it looked so much like Guangdong Province and that region there, but also with beautiful French architecture. Really, it's a pretty city. It's got huge lakes in the middle of it, an interesting architectural blend.

Q: Cambodia, did that take a little of your time?

HUHTALA: It did also. Let me just add, before we leave Vietnam, a couple of things I was involved in especially the last year, were deliberate preparations for the day when normalization would come. We went and visited the old Vietnamese Embassy on R Street in Washington. It was in a state of great disrepair and we realized we were going to have to give it back. So we instituted some expensive repairs. It was one of those beautiful, old big houses. Then on one of my trips to Hanoi I was charged with trying to find where our old consulate had been in 1954 when we left Hanoi. There had been a little cultural center there too; I was able to locate both those properties. We were preparing for a very complicated property negotiation that would be part of the normalization process. Then I got down to Ho Chi Minh (Saigon), and saw the old embassy there and some of the compounds. The other thing I was doing was arranging for the first FSOs to come through Vietnamese training in FSI who were not for the ODP program; in other words people to go and be future political and economic officers in Hanoi. The language program here was very small and it was all southern Vietnamese, all the text books and the teachers, all using the southern dialect not at all appropriate for people who'd be assigned to Hanoi. So we worked very closely with FSI and they found a northerner to come and be an instructor.

Q: Okay, well Cambodia then.

HUHTALA: Cambodia. Throughout the 1980's the U.S. had been supporting the non-communist resistance to the government imposed after the Vietnamese occupation began in 1979. The resistance was led by a party called FUNCINPEC, who were royalists supporting Prince Sihanouk, and included the KPNLF of Son Sann. Khmer Rouge remnants were also involved in the resistance, though we always kept our distance from them. There had been a sort of low-intensity guerrilla war going on all through that period. We saw Hun Sen as a Vietnamese-installed stooge and we didn't think he had much credibility. He was in charge of this communist government in place in Cambodia all through the 1980s. The horrific events of the Khmer Rouge period had all become known by then., so many heartbreaking stories.

So negotiations started in about '89 I think, led by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, particularly the U.S., Britain and France. We had China's cooperation as well and put together a peace agreement which was signed in Paris in 1990. (I remember I drafted Secretary Baker's remarks for that. I thought that was kind of exciting.) The agreement led the way to the UN force which came in to restore order and produced the first elections in Cambodian history. Hun Sen reinvented himself as a democrat and leader of the Cambodian People's Party; he won the 1993 elections, together with Prince Ranariddh, the leader of FUNCINPEC. Because the results were very close, the two agreed to a coalition government in which they each became co-prime ministers, and there were dual ministers for some of the key ministries as well. Needless to say, this was a fundamentally unstable arrangement and boded ill for the future.

We had the sense during my two years on the desk that Cambodia was beginning to pull itself together and move towards a functioning democracy, though it still had a lot of problems, and not just the problems of poverty and corruption that any country in that region started out with. Boy, that was a country of shell-shocked people. The entire country had post traumatic shock syndrome in many ways. Every single Cambodian had lost people who were dear to them. An entire class of intellectuals and educated people had been completely wiped out. All educators were killed or executed, if you wore eyeglasses or if you were a doctor or a lawyer you were killed. It had just been a nightmare. Some of the same NGOs and charitable organizations that were helping out in Vietnam were also helping out in Cambodia. One good thing that we had to offer was a diaspora of Cambodians who had come to our country as refugees and got themselves educated. Some of them went back to head up human rights organizations, to help write the new constitution, that kind of thing. We did our best to facilitate that.

Q: Did you find within the Cambodian community problems of what we were doing and what was going on?

HUHTALA: No, we didn't have a lot of opposition, but there was a very interesting episode. One of the U.S. organizations that had been lobbying for renewed relations with the countries in Indochina brought a party of Cambodian dancers to the United States to go on tour. The elegant court dance that you probably associate with Thailand, originated in the Khmer Empire and had been almost completely wiped out under Pol Pot and then painstakingly re-established in the late '80s. Aged dancers were remembering enough to teach young kids the classic dance. So it was a historic event for this troupe to come to the United States, where they performed in several cities, including at the Kennedy Center. We all went to watch it. Of course we helped get their visas, which was still difficult at that period. Then while they were here, some of the dancers tried to defect and there was a huge political mess because the organizers were on the hook for getting them back. The dancers were giving press conferences; there was a public storm.

Q: What happened?

HUHTALA: A couple of them did get political asylum. They had a very good case actually.

Q: Was the Khmer Rouge back in the jungle or along the Thai border doing something?

HUHTALA: They had retreated to the Thai border and a couple of other isolated spots around the country. Their leadership was scattered and they were not an organized force. I remember as part of this reconciliation process, Khieu Sampan, one of the original KR Politburo members and foreign minister under Pol Pot, returned to Phnom Penh for some official reason. A mob of Cambodians set upon him and beat him up, cutting his scalp; he had to be pulled to safety. The incident showed there were still incredibly strong feelings among the Cambodian people, even though most of them were not clamouring for a court process or war crimes trial at that point. I think they were just trying to forget the horror. They did put together several monuments to the genocide. There's the one at the Tuol Sleng Prison right outside of Phnom Penh that it will chill your bones if you see it.

Q: Is that the one with all the skulls?

HUHTALA: It's got a huge pile of skulls arranged behind a glass case but it also has mug shots of all the victims because the Khmer Rouge took a photo of each person before they bludgeoned them to death. There are hundreds of little black and white Polaroid pictures just wallpapering the entire building. It's the most horrifying thing to look in these faces of these people who know that they are about to die. Unforgettable.

Q: That's one of the most horrifying events of the 20th century in which there were an awful lot of horrifying events.

HUHTALA: Yes, it's right up there.

Q: Was Laos much of a factor?

HUHTALA: Laos was very much a satellite of Vietnam. It still is in many ways, a very backward country. Oh yeah, I didn't tell you this part. We had managed to keep our tiny mission going since 1975. When I was in Chiang Mai for instance in the late '70s my colleagues in Vientiane were not allowed to travel unless they got permission. They were really harassed by the government. Well by 1990 that harassment had pretty much stopped and we were able to normalize relations. We upgraded Charlie Salmon to the status of Ambassador and received our first ambassador from Laos. The Lao were cooperating very well on the POW/MIA side too so this was warmly endorsed by the League of Families and the other political actors. Nevertheless it's still very much a communist country, very repressive and we've never been able to make a lot of progress in our relations with Laos.

Q: Did you have any, did they hit your responsibility? You had some of these soldiers of fortune going out and trying to lead bands of, I guess in the hinterlands, who were sort of playing Green Berets after the war is over.

HUHTALA: That happened before I came to the desk. That happened in the '80s, Bo Gritz and his people. That left a lot of echoes in the area. Also there'd been charges of "yellow rain," allegations of chemical warfare which have never been proven, to this day. This brings us to the issue of the Hmong people who had been our allies during the war.

Q: This is the mountain people?

HUHTALA: Yes, Hmong who had worked with the CIA in the resistance and fought very valiantly. Many of them came to our country as refugees settling in -

Q: Minnesota and places like that.

HUHTALA: Minnesota, also North Carolina, and the central valley of California. They have become a political force in terms of our relations with Southeast Asia now. Back in the early '90s that we were just beginning to see the outlines of that. Initially they didn't fit well into the United States. When the big wave of Indochinese refugees came to the U.S., at first there were efforts to settle them very evenly across the whole country. Vietnamese, Cambodians, Lao, Hmong, they were all going to be evenly distributed across the country. The first thing that happened was that they immediately clumped out into areas where they could be with their own people. So now there are Cambodians in Long Beach, Vietnamese in San Jose and Westminster and the Hmong in rural areas where they were able to carry out the kind of agriculture that they were familiar with. Unlike some of the others, the Vietnamese did extremely well economically, including in education as you pointed out. They've become stellar citizens and I think quite a few Cambodians have as well. The Hmong have not had such success in integrating.

Q: They didn't even have a written language as I recall.

HUHTALA: I don't think they had a written language; they practiced kind of an animistic religion and had a very different take on life, basically. The ones who came over as refugees, many of them have never learned our language. However, their kids are American citizens and speak wonderful English and are becoming something of a political force.

Q: Well this is America. We pick them up and we chew them up and out they come Americans. The real tragedy of America is often between the generation that first comes over but never quite get there and the kids have become Americans and the estrangement between the two. I mean it's very difficult because the parents have made the sacrifice and then the kids take off leaving their parents behind.

HUHTALA: I don't think Hmong kids are leaving their parents behind at all, really, that's not my experience, but they are able to give voice to some of the concerns and resentments that the older folks still have. There have been special bills in Congress to give them citizenship even though they can't pass the language requirement and that kind of thing. Well, who made that happen? Their kids.

Q: Ross Perot was sort of a true believer in the missing in action movement and all and he was a political force while you were there I think. Did his organization or his clout affect you at all?

HUHTALA: I believe that EDT, his corporation, was making some charitable donations when I was running that program. I left the desk in the summer of 1992 and he was just beginning to emerge as a serious presidential contender at that point. But we knew about him and about his views. He was kind of on the fringe there in terms of believing that there were still live prisoners being held in Southeast Asia.

Q: I would have thought it would be very difficult to deal with and understand the process of an American who looks you in the eye and says, "The Vietnamese have got Americans in tiger cases hidden in the jungle." One had to ask, first place it's an expense to do this and to what purpose outside just to be mean.

HUHTALA: I really put that down to the whole complex of negative emotions surrounding our involvement in Vietnam. The fact that it was the first war that America experienced where the majority of the country turned against it, it didn't have popular support. Remember the draft was still in place and so many unwilling people were being either sent off to fight that war or they were fleeing to Canada. It was a different war than the kind of thing we'd ever had before in many, many ways. Then of course we lost, and the country fell to the communists. Everything that we had been trying to prevent happened, so add that into the mix of normal resentment and sadness after a war and after you've had heavy loss of personnel. Add into this all this other negativity and you get a lot of conspiracy theories and that certainly is what happened. There are still people in this country who harbour very deep, dark thoughts about Vietnam.

Q: Then we're up to 1992, whither?

HUHTALA: I went to Canada.

Q: Oh yeah, well this would make sense, I can see this a solid career trajectory.

HUHTALA: Well now, come on! I was ready for a job either as a principal officer or a DCM. I was an FS-1. My window for promotion into the Senior Service was open and I still had 4-4 in French, and it was time to go overseas again. In fact I was recruited by my friends in personnel to bid on the job in Quebec City as principal officer. This was the year that my daughter was getting ready to go to college, our oldest, the one born in Paris. She was going to go to the University of Virginia. There weren't any great opportunities for me in Asia that year, and I thought it would be nice to be in the same time zone as Karen. So I took that job, and it was a completely different experience, very interesting.

Q: Well let's talk about that. You were there from '92 to?

HUHTALA: To '95.

Q: '95, three years. What was the situation in Quebec at the time?

HUHTALA: Quebec was on the verge of voting in a second referendum as to whether they should secede from Canada, a major issue. Of course there was huge American interest in this since Canada is our biggest neighbour and a very close friend and ally. They had had a referendum in 1980 that had not passed but they were building up to another one. For several years there had been a series of negotiations among all the Canadian provinces with Ottawa to try and meet the demands of the Quebecers, who felt that they had a distinct culture, and deserved special treatment. There was a historical burden as well; many Quebecers felt that after France lost Canada to England in 1759 their rights had not been protected. They were demanding all kinds of special concessions in terms of assistance from the other provinces, fiscal transfers, language policy etc., etc. There was something called the Meech Lake process which Prime Minister Mulroney had tried to set in place, but the negotiations were not successful and there was frustration on all sides.

When I first arrived in 1992 the other provinces were getting increasingly fed up with Quebec and soon the negotiations fell apart spectacularly. The Liberal Party in power in Quebec Province fell; the separatist party, Parti Québécois was elected and began putting the machinery in motion to conduct another referendum on sovereignty.

This was the only place in the world we actually have two consulates general in one province; a big one in Montreal that caters to the business community and the many different economic interests that we have with that part of Canada, and the special purpose post up in Quebec City. Montreal had several agencies and about 40 American staff; in Quebec we had a Consul General (me), a vice consul and a few local staff, that was it. But because the Quebecers considered themselves a separate nation within a nation, Quebec was their capital and so the diplomatic corps in Quebec City outranked the diplomats assigned to Montreal. There were only two Consuls General in Quebec (aside from several honorary consuls), from France and the United States. We, apparently over the years, had taken turns being dean of the corps. In this case I beat my French colleagues opposed by two weeks and so I was Madame la Doyenne of the consular corps, which the ambitious French Consul General could never get over. When they would have meetings of the entire consular corps they'd bring all the consuls from Montreal up to Quebec. My French colleague and I would be at the head of the table and I was the dean of the entire corps. Quebec was a province that maintained its own diplomatic missions around the world and they had done so for like 25 years. They had their own aid program francophone countries. They had one of the major international meetings of La Francophonie there in Quebec City while I was there. All in all, they had a lot of pretensions to independence already.

Q: Did you find when you went there, first place this has not been on your radar scope before, but before going up there what was the feeling of the people you talked about, let's say, okay what if the Quebecers do vote for separation what does this mean for the United States and would it happen anyway?

HUHTALA: The U.S. government was very strongly opposed to seeing Canada break up, for very sound reasons. Quebec is a huge province, stretching from the Vermont and New York border up to the Artic Circle. If it became independent it would cut off the maritime provinces of Canada, which are mostly Anglophone, and it would also possibly encourage a different separatist tendency at the other end of the country in British Columbia. We were very concerned about this. The people I talked to inside Quebec, on the other hand, kept assuring me that this would be a good thing; that an independent Quebec would be the U.S.' seventh largest trading partner, and that they were very pro-American (which they were, in fact). If a Quebecer thought you were an Anglo-Canadian he'd likely be very hostile, but once you let him know you were an American he'd cover you with charm. They really liked America. There was a lot of U.S. investment there and a lot of Quebec investment in the United States. Quebec even had a trade office in New York. So they were trying to spin this as something that would be good for the United States. Nevertheless, our policy never changed.

I found that I actually got a little bit cross-wise with our Embassy in Ottawa and with Washington because I was travelling all around the province talking to people of all walks of life and reporting back that pro-separatist sentiment was very strong, and there was a good chance the coming referendum could pass. Here's what I heard in this part, here's what I heard over here. I was allowed to report directly to Washington, with a copy Ottawa. On one occasion I sent in an analysis that said the referendum was probably a year away but it looked at that point as if it could go either way. I recommended that Washington start thinking about policy options in case the referendum passed. Boy, did I get in trouble! My DCM called and reamed me out for making policy pronouncements as a mere Consul General. Technically he was right, of course. But I think the real problem that this was very unwelcome news. They didn't want to think about that in Washington. In the end the referendum took place a couple of months after I left Quebec and the separatist question failed by one half of one percent. So I had been right; it was very, very close. I remember that discussion with my DCM, when he said, "Marie, you shouldn't have reported that," and I said, "Well, I'm sorry but it's what I'm hearing here." He said, "Yeah, but you're just talking to all these French speakers." I said, "Yes, that's right, I'm doing all my work in French. That's why I'm getting something that you're not hearing in Ottawa." The implication was that French speakers were not to be trusted!

Q: Who was our ambassador at the time?

HUHTALA: For most of my tour it was Jim Blanchard, former governor of Michigan.

Q: Was he concerned on this issue?

HUHTALA: Well, yes, I mean everyone was concerned about it. He only made a couple of visits to Quebec. When he first got to the country he made a very high-profile train trip across Canada. He started at the eastern seaboard and went across the entire country, visiting every province except Quebec. A month or so later he finally came to Quebec. Of course the Quebecers noticed this. I'm sure it was calculated on his part to show that he was going to be most friendly with the "loyal" parts of Canada and not these upstarts. But it was not well received. He spent a lot of his time doing some very important work in the trade field. He negotiated an Open Skies agreement on aviation, for instance, a major accomplishment. He was a successful ambassador in many ways but he didn't come off too well in Quebec.

Q: We'll move to Quebec itself but did you get much feeling that the Maritimes, I mean I realize this wasn't your bailiwick but here they're very Anglo, I mean their capital is essentially Boston.

HUHTALA: I never even travelled to the Maritime provinces. I conferred with my colleague in Halifax and yes, I was getting some of that sense. They were very worried about being cut off by an independent Quebec. That's a very valid concern. As I said, the other provinces were really fed up with the Quebecers because they'd been negotiating with them for a couple of years, giving them concessions, and the Quebecers just pocketed them and wanted more. The Quebecers really did want to be sort of functionally independent, at a minimum. This was really getting under the skin of the rest of Canada.

Q: I would think that if I were living in British Columbia and had to learn French as for a government job I'd say what the hell is this?

HUHTALA: They do, of course. All government officials are expected to be bilingual.

Q: This is a bone tossed. I would imagine that you would be walking on egg shells most of the time you were there or not? The media, others who were trying to get something out of it you couldn't give.

HUHTALA: It was good training. It was really good training. It's the first time I had to do a lot of media interviews, and having to do it in a foreign language was extra hard. It was the first time I did television interviews, for instance; also major speeches with extended Q & A's in French. I learned to be very clear about what our policy is but to also be open and receptive to what they had to say to me.

Q: Was our policy, we might feel that we don't want Canada to break up but at the same time this is sort of your decision and our being the colossus to the south would mean that you would have be very, I can see headlines, American counsel general calls for a no vote on this or something like this. How did you handle it?

HUHTALA: We had a mantra that we were always using. I can't remember exactly how it went, but it was along the lines of: the United States values a prosperous, democratic and united Canada. I would just repeat the mantra over and over again. I'd be pressed to say what the U.S. would do if Quebec seceded, if it become an independent country. I would say, "The situation were to change, we would look at that of course." This was as far as I could go. Sometimes I would add that Quebecers had the right to vote however they wanted to vote, but we had a preference. Our preference was that Canada stay united.

Q: How did you find contact with the Quebec government?

HUHTALA: They were delightful to work with, but they were wooing me of course, they wanted U.S. support for the separatist cause. They were charming, urbane, and intelligent. They were also sort of balancing their international relationships between the U .S. and France. My French colleague had a huge "cooperation" budget. I had zero budget for aid or anything like that. He was always bringing over cultural troops, having big parties, sponsoring trips to Paris. They call it cooperation instead of aid. His cooperation budget was over a million dollars a year for this little province. Yet he was making about as much headway as I was.

Q: In a way, during the winter does the place shut down and everybody head for Florida?

HUHTALA: A lot of them went down to Florida, a lot of snowbirds.

Quebec's relationship with the mother country, France, is very complex. They felt deeply abandoned when the Conquest, as they call it, of 1759 took place, the climatic battle on the Plains of Abraham, Wolf versus Montcalm. When that happened, when England won all of Canada from France, all of the functionaries, the administrators, the bishops and many church leaders, just got on a boat and went back to France and left the colonists, who were all French peasants, basically, to fend for themselves. Quebecers still resent that to this day. In recent decades France has made a big effort, with shiny baubles and De Gaulle visiting and saying, "Vive le Québec libre!" Many Quebecers took a jaundiced view of that. They didn't trust France anymore. Instead they look to their south, they would love to be our friend, but they view themselves as a little French island in the huge Anglophone sea of North America. They firmly believe that they cannot exist as a people if they lose their language. So they have ridiculous language laws, for example all the schools are in French, the shop signs have to be in French. If they want to have a sign in English it has to be in smaller lettering than the sign in French and the French lettering has to be above the English lettering. They have pitched battles over these language policies. They're very chauvinistic, it's really unfortunate. That was especially true in Quebec City. Montreal was more cosmopolitan, with immigrants from all around the world. In Quebec, sometimes they would shock me. Once for instance there was an immigrant from West Africa who spoke native French but he was black. He had lived in Quebec for 40 years and he was running for the federal parliament; he seemed like an attractive candidate to me. I remember one of my local employees in whose district he was running, saying, "Never in my life would I ever vote for somebody like that." It was just racist, just pure racist. That was distressing.

Q: You were there at a time when there was this abrupt cut-off from the church which had run everything and then all of a sudden the whole youth group or something said screw you to the Catholic Church.

HUHTALA: You know a lot about this, that's good.

Q: Well, I follow these things.

HUHTALA: They called it the Quiet Revolution. It started in the 1960s when a new generation came of age. The Church had been repressing the people very much, very greatly. I heard horrible stories, like the one about Mama and Papa in church with their four children, and the priest at the altar looks down in front of the whole congregation and says, "Well Madame, your youngest is already three, what are you doing? Get busy!" The people, by and large, were poor and they were not well educated. So when a new generation came of age in the '60s which was a time of intellectual ferment around the world anyway, they basically just turned their backs on the Church.

Q: It was a very really abrupt

HUHTALA: It was very abrupt and by the time I got to Quebec in 1992, 40% of all children there were being born out of wedlock. Huge numbers of people were living together with their partners without marriage. They called them conjoints, they would say, "This is my conjoint" instead of "This is my spouse," and it was quite acceptable. At that time Eino and I had been married for 20 years and we kept making mistakes in this area. For example, if I said something like, "My daughter is in university," people would respond in a way that indicated they thought: "It's not his daughter, it's your daughter, so you must have been married previously."

At one point the head of the Liberal Party in the province was preparing to become premier because his party had won the elections, and so big news item was that Daniel Johnson had married his conjointe. The two had been together for ten years but they suddenly felt they should get married.

Throughout the province beautiful churches had been abandoned, turned into restaurants or even condos. The amazing thing about Quebecers is the way they curse; while people in a lot of countries use scatological terms, Quebecers use religious terms. When they are really angry they'll say, Chalice! or Host! Or even Tabernacle! (This was kind of horrifying to me as a Catholic girl.) But you know what you found too, by the '90s, though many people felt they were not Catholics anymore, not religious at all, many cults were starting to spring up. Several odd, crazy, whacked out cults, similar to the Branch Davidians, were gaining a foothold in Quebec, because after all, people do need meaning, they need something.

Q: Their birth rate had gone way down.

HUHTALA: Yes, it had.

Q: The culture there, society was not responsive to immigrants were they or?

HUHTALA: There had been huge immigration. This is another really important factor. Because of the declining birth rate, the flight of English-speaking Canadians to other provinces, and because of their aspirations to independence, the Quebec government through its missions overseas was actively encouraging immigration from francophones. As a result there were Lebanese, Romanians, Africans, Greeks and any other people who could speak French coming into Quebec, disproportionately to Montreal because it was a more cosmopolitan area. But it turned out that when it came time to vote, these people didn't view themselves as having immigrated to a future independent country. They were happy to have come to Canada so they were not inclined to vote for sovereignty. So for demographic reasons, the referendum of 1995 was seen as a last-chance opportunity. Native Quebecers were having fewer kids than recent immigrants who were not going to support sovereignty. This really was their last chance. And in the end, they lost by a margin of less than one percent.

Q: How about the French intellectuals? A lot of my knowledge of France is based on two films I've seen, the Decline of America and then the other one was the Barbarian Invasions. But both of them are a bunch of French intellectuals talking away. They have sort of their chattering, their intellectual class didn't they?

HUHTALA: Yes, of course they did. They had good universities and they had many people who had studied in France. Educated Quebecers speak beautiful, grammatical, poetic French (but with a horrible accent). They have well-justified claims to being intellectuals of their own. And there were certain circles that were very francophile.

Q: Did you find yourself getting engaged in dinner parties where everybody was sort of quoting the French masters or something like that?

HUHTALA: Sometimes, especially when my colleague, the French consul general, would have dinner parties. One time my poor husband was so frustrated because we all sort of sat around and had this extended intellectual discussion of politics in French. It was kind of tough on him although he had gone to the local university, Laval University, and brushed up his French there. They had a very good program there for non-native speakers.

Q: Well, I mean this is sort of intellectual show off time.

HUHTALA: Yes, very much so.

Q: The French are much more inclined to do this.

HUHTALA: Sometimes I would find opportunities when I had visiting American groups to invite the French consul general so that he would have to speak English. He could do so, but he wasn't real comfortable. I'm afraid I took a perverse pleasure in that.

Q: Did you find yourself sort of in competition with the French consul general?

HUHTALA: Not really. We were essentially colleagues and we became friends. We also made lots of wonderful friends among the Quebecers. If you can put their politics aside and just get to know them as people, they're delightful, and we had a lot of fun. They used to always ask, what kind of name is Huhtala? They all seemed to have an obsession with tracing ancestry, and all of them claimed to be "pure laine" French. So what kind of name is Huhtala? At first I always explained the Finnish origin of our name, but in time I began telling people it was American. They would start to get upset with that answer, and I'd say, "Look, we have every kind of name in America. We don't care that much about national origins."

Q: Who was the president, our president while you were there?

HUHTALA: Bill Clinton was elected the first fall I was there.

Q: How was he seen there?

HUHTALA: He was the object of fascination, like American presidents always are, but people were wary about him. I must say that the sovereigntists believed that they had a better chance with the Republican administrations than with Democrats. At that point Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was very badly discredited and was about to lose office. I believe Clinton and Mulroney were old buddies; I think that was part of the problem. In early 1993 I was asked to give a presentation on the Clinton administration's foreign policy to the provincial cabinet ministers. They were very, very interested in it.

Q: Of course you were there when the, already the NAFTA had already gone into effect.

HUHTALA: No it went into effect while I was there. There was a bilateral U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement that had been in effect for about 10 years and was beginning to show sizable payouts, economically for both countries. The tripartite North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was in the final stages of negotiation.

Q: This was to include Mexico.

HUHTALA: To include Mexico, yes. Remember Ross Perot saying there would be a giant sucking sound, as all the jobs will go down to Mexico, a prediction that did not prove true. The Canadian government was very interested in NAFTA. (Of course Quebecers wanted a quadrilateral agreement once they became independent.) I gave several speeches supporting NAFTA and explaining what it would mean for Quebec.

Q: Where there any disputes on, well not disputes but what was our view of the Canadian medical situation? They're very proud of their medical program but at the same time if there are any problems everybody runs down to the United States. It's peculiar.

HUHTALA: That certainly did happen, though I never knew anybody who failed to get critically needed medical care because of the socialized medicine system. For elective procedures people would tend to go outside of the country. We had some Quebecers who would go into Maine or New Hampshire to have their children, seeking better or cheaper medical care perhaps, then come back and file reports of birth of an American citizen with us. I remember my staff objecting to this. I reminded them firmly that these were new American citizens, and we had to treat them courteously like any other constituents."

Q: Did terrorism or people running from the law or something intrude in your territory?

HUHTALA: We had very good law enforcement cooperation through our Embassy. This was in the period right after the first Gulf War when the U.S. was periodically doing bombing runs over Iraq to enforce the no-fly zone. Whenever something like that would flare up I would get personalized protection from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The Mounties would drive me around in their car and protect me 24 hours a day. The Consulate General is located on a bluff overlooking the St. Lawrence River, near the Chateau Frontenac in Old Quebec. The top two floors are the residence, the bottom two floors are the office. We knew we'd be sitting ducks if anybody wanted to take a barge out into the middle of the St. Lawrence and fire a rocket at us. So I would get personal protection whenever things got tense in the world of terrorism. We were there during the first attack on the World Trade Center and during the Oklahoma City attack. Especially in that latter case, Quebecers of every stripe expressed great sympathy and support for us.

Q: After, you left there in what year?

HUHTALA: 1995.

Q: '95, is there anything else we should talk about?

HUHTALA: One other thing. I got a master's degree in political science, concentrating on international relations, at Laval University. It added another dimension to my experience there, opening up the academic world.

Q: Great. Anyway I think we'll stop at this point. But if you have anything next time we get together, before we move on, where did you go after that?

HUHTALA: Senior seminar.

Q: Senior seminar, okay.

Q: Today is the 15th of November, the Ides of November 2005. Marie, let's talk about the Senior Seminar. You were there from 1995 to 1996?

HUHTALA: That's right.

Q: How did you find the Senior Seminar?

HUHTALA: Well, again it was a great opportunity to sit back and reflect on the issues of the day. I liked very much the fact that we were going to be concentrating on U.S. domestic issues and travelling around the country. I said at the time that it's a shame you have to put in more than 20 years in the Foreign Service before you do a serious study of the United States. It probably would have helped us earlier on in our careers to have had the experiences that we had that year.

As you know, the Senior Seminar program was largely directed by the students themselves. There were about 32 of us, if I remember correctly, about half from State and half from other agencies. We had a representative from each of the military services including the Coast Guard, plus folks from CIA, from Commerce, from Agriculture, from EPA, DOD, AID, NSA, and FBI. Some of the regional travel was already prescribed for us, like the first long weekend, Labor Day weekend, we went to Chesapeake Bay to look into the ecological issues down there. In September there was a fascinating trip to Alaska. I had never been to Alaska (except to stop over at Elmendorf Airbase en route to Asia). That was great. We spent over a week there. Then we had other trips, one to the Northeast, one to the South, one to the Midwest, California. We students did all the planning and organizing of these trips.

I was on the committee that organized our trip to the Northeast in November 2005. We were able to do the New York City portion of our trip and then we were going to go up to Yale, to talk to Paul Kennedy and do some things up in New Hampshire, but that's when the first government shut down occurred and we were dead in the water. We were ordered back to Washington because we were considered "non-essential employees," even though we'd already spent the money for the travel and we were half way through our trip. It was really idiotic to have to cut it short like that, and very frustrating for us.

Q: One of the things, I remember meeting Pru Bushnell now who later sort of presided over the demise of the Senior Seminar, this came straight from Colin Powell, but one of the things she noted on this was her observation of the Senior Seminar was towards the end the students at the Senior Seminar, sort of around the colonel level in the military, the equivalent to that or so, became acting a little bit like a gang or a bunch of kids. They sort of played around with their speakers and all this and I was wondering whether you noticed that?

HUHTALA: We did not have that happen. The military officers in our group, like most military I've worked with were very serious and very responsible.

Q: I'm not talking about the military, I'm talking about the rest.

HUHTALA: Oh the rest.

Q: Yeah, I mean in other words I'm talking about everybody got a little bit almost smart-alecky, a little bit spoiled.

HUHTALA: There were various dynamics that went on. When you throw people together for that length of time, some people were more serious than others, that's true. But I don't think it got out of hand for our class.

Q: Did anything sort of come through to you when you got out or were about to, about the United States that you really hadn't been as aware of before?

HUHTALA: We chose to study some issues in depth that we had not necessarily known a lot about. For instance, farm policy. 1995 was the year the Congress tried again to write a farm bill; I guess they did write a farm bill that year. We invited speakers in and we became familiar with the scandal, really, of the U.S. farm subsidies program which the bill that was passed that year was intended to phase out. I notice it's been ten years now and it still is not phased out.

We examined the politics behind that which were very, very powerful. Many members of Congress technically qualified as farmers because they had land some place and they'd been getting huge subsidies themselves, with lots of corruption involved. Then we went out to the Midwest and they sent us out to individual farms to stay with families. Most of the families had saved a few acres of their crop for us to bring in. I got to ride a combine and bring in the corn, which was fun. What was interesting was talking with the people, finding how technologically sophisticated they were. That trip had also included a visit to the Chicago Board of Trade, where they have the futures market for agricultural products. All of the farmers in Indiana where we were had computers, their network, their Internet set up and they were following the futures every single day. They were managing the market and using GPS to track their fields.

Q: GPS, Global Positioning System.

HUHTALA: Exactly. They had very scientific means of deciding when to plant, what to plant where, that kind of thing and gearing it to the market. So they were no dummies by any stretch of the imagination. At the same time they were socially very conservative, what we now call "red states," and that was kind of interesting. A good friend and colleague, who later went on to have a couple of ambassadorships, he and I were sent to adjoining farms. He stayed with the son and his family, I stayed with the parents. They each showed us around their farms, let us bring in some of the crop and discussed a lot of issues with us. Then on the last evening we had a joint dinner, the two families came together for dinner and it was a really good experience. But at the end the father and mother, the older couple, the ones I was staying with, approached Jimmy and me very seriously and said, "We know you're from Washington but we want to give you an important gift that is going to be very meaningful to you," and they were holding little Bibles. They gave each one of us a Bible. They looked me in the eye very seriously and said, "We hope that you will accept Jesus as your saviour, it's very important for you to do that." Seriously as I could, I said back, "Well thank you very much, I'm a practicing Catholic, I do accept Jesus, but probably not the way you are thinking." I accepted the Bible. Then they made the same little speech to my friend and he was as nice as could be, but said, "Thank you very much, but I'm Jewish." They looked a little surprised. I thought it was kind of interesting that they were essentially proselytizing us. Religion was not supposed to be part of this trip.

Later in the year we actually had a unit on religion in America. I had met a professor of religious studies at one of the northeastern universities when I was in Quebec and we invited him down to talk about the role of religion in American life. He explained how we are a much more religious society than any of the European countries, including Canada, how this is something foreigners don't understand about America.

This also was the year that Newt Gingrich was in his glory. It was the year of the Contract with America, the takeover of both houses of Congress by the Republicans, so we delved rather deeply into those political issues. It was a year of great concern about what was happening economically in our country. People were kind of falling through the safety net. It was before welfare reform had been enacted. There was a lot of worry about people losing their health insurance, which is still a very big issue, actually. Of course, President Clinton's health insurance initiative had failed by the time we got there. Corporations seemed to be charging ahead; it was the beginning of the out-sourcing boom. The American worker was sort of left in the lurch. So it was good that we were able to get speakers in on all of these issues and really learn a lot of things.

Q: Among your group, did you see the resurgence of the Republican right wing, obviously your main concern professionally was foreign affairs, did you see a change?

HUHTALA: A change in what?

Q: Was there concern about initiatives and where we were going and that?

HUHTALA: Yeah, because this was a period I think of fairly profound political realignment in the United States and we were trying to understand that, without for the moment applying it directly to foreign affairs. In fact that was the point of that year, to be very focused on the domestic scene. We were trying to figure out where our own country was going.

Q: It was a great time because it was a critical time which is still with us. By this time, this was '95, '96 so the Clinton Administration was finishing off its first term. We're not talking about Senior Seminar but talking about your colleagues, what was the feeling about Christopher, I mean the foreign policy establishment at the time? What were you getting from your colleagues who were working in Washington? You'd been away for some time.

HUHTALA: Yes, although I had been in Quebec so I hadn't been that far removed. We had some speakers from the Administration come in and of course we talked with our colleagues. That was a period of severe budget retrenchment, which I think we talked about earlier, so there was a lot of unhappiness in the Building, about lack of resources, lack of staffing. That was the period when they were not bringing in new blood, they weren't even hiring to attrition. That was beginning to be felt. At the same time they were, I think, revising the hardship differentials for posts upward so that people were making less money. There was discontent. There was unhappiness, but nothing compared to the current situation, which is chaos in comparison. I don't think there was anything fundamentally awry in the foreign affairs community at that time.

Q: Now you're getting out in '96 and you'd spent your time up in the snows of Canada. What about, were you still an Asian hand or were able to quote, " Play your Asian card again?"

HUHTALA: Yup. I was reassigned back to the EAP Bureau. In fact they were courting me rather assiduously in the fall of that year as we were doing our bids. I was one of the few persons with any Asia experience in the Senior Seminar class. Among the Foreign Service people we had a lot of people who had worked on the Middle East or Africa or Latin America. So I kept trying to re-inject an Asian perspective into the class.

We had a series of lunch time brown bag optional events where people would talk about different things. One colleague demonstrated how the American Sign Language works. So I did a little program on Chinese characters, which they enjoyed a lot.

We had a month-long special individual research project to carry out, and what I looked into was Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) issues in Asia, which was something that I had not been very familiar with as a political officer, not being an economic officer. I did a very interesting project looking into the problems we'd had with China for instance, trying to get China to agree to make some IPR enforcement activities to satisfy our Special 301 process. That month of study involved optional travel, so I went out to Seattle and talked to the folks at Microsoft and the folks at Boeing to get there take on the IPR challenges they were facing in Asia. It was a lot of fun, and it was really interesting. It turned out to have a lot of relevance for my future assignments. Plus, I won the award for having the best research program of my class.

Q: Then where did you go in 1996?

HUHTALA: In 1996 I went back to the Department, to the East Asia and Pacific, Bureau, EAP. While I had been away, since I left VLC in 1992, they had combined the offices of Thailand and Burma with Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia. So there was a new office called BCLT Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam Affairs. It had come together in the winter of 1995. In the summer of 1996 I took over as the second director of that office. Right off the bat there were some organizational and administrative challenges, because the two offices were not yet functioning as one. There was a deputy for each side of the house and there was no real interchange or interplay among them. I came in with a new deputy director and we rearranged the responsibilities so that, for instance, the Thai desk officer would have backup duty on Cambodia and the Laos desk officer would be back up on Burma. In that way the two offices would become better meshed.

We had a lot of challenges in those two years in BCLTV. The first one had to do with Burma, a country with a horrible human rights record, where Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi had been kept under house arrest for many years. In the summer of '96 the Congress had passed an amendment to one of the appropriations bills called the Cohen- Feinstein amendment, which mandated economic sanctions if its human rights record deteriorated further.

Q: Was this pointed at Burma?

HUHTALA: It was Burma-specific, yes. In the fall of '96, late fall as I recall, a student uprising occurred. Students began resisting the regime, which was called SLORC, State Law and Order Restoration Committee. It sounds like something out of a James Bond movie, the SLORC. But it was a very repressive, ugly regime and students had come out in the streets protesting. The regime responded by closing all the universities in the country and driving tanks in the street to repress the students. We don't know how many people were killed but it was dreadful. That having occurred, it became necessary for us to look at whether that action triggered the sanctions. Personally I don't think sanctions are a very effective means of diplomacy, even in places where they've worked, like in South Africa, where it took many, many years. But I knew that we were charged with upholding the law. In early '97 we started a series of interagency meetings, sub-cabinet level, to hammer this out. To my surprise some of the people who had been most anxious to condemn the Burmese authorities, for instance the human rights director at the NSC, were getting cold feet about the application of sanctions.

Q: I find it hard to think of anything the Burmese would want from us other than golf clubs for their generals .

HUHTALA: No, in fact there were several large American corporations still working there, Unocal, Chevron, and Motorola, I believe. Unocal was involved in building a pipeline. There are serious natural gas deposits in Burmese waters in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Unocal was building a gas pipeline from southern Burma into Thailand. There were lawsuits filed in U.S. courts charging that Unocal was complicit or at least benefiting from serious human rights abuses, including forced labor. There was some other American investment in the country and the sanctions prescribed by the Cohen-Feinstein Amendment would place a ban on any new U.S. investment in Burma. We looked at the issue for a period of months, in a series of interagency meetings, and I was among those who came to the conclusion that the legislation had in fact been triggered. As a result, at our recommendation, in the spring of '97, I think it was in April, the President issued an executive order imposing economic sanctions on Burma.

The problem with that was that once we'd imposed sanctions we'd used up one of our few remaining tools of diplomatic leverage with a regime that was very impervious to our concerns anyway. I remember in the fall of '96, before this crack down had occurred, I made my first trip to Rangoon as office director, and I remember sitting down with a director general from their foreign ministry and saying to him, "Well, our relationship is not very strong. We don't agree on very many things. I'd like to explore areas where we could try and get closer, have better relations." He just looked at me and said, "We're not interested in having better relations with your country. We don't need you, we're fine by ourselves." When you have that kind of an attitude it's pretty hard to move forward. That was one of the major challenges of the first year.

Q: During your time, how did it play out?

HUHTALA: We had the sanctions in place. There was no new American investment. There was a lot of pressure on the few companies that still had investments there to pull out, and some of them did. I think that's when Chevron and Motorola closed their doors. Unocal was still engaged. The problem was that European companies did not face similar sanctions and we'd not been able to get a lot of traction in persuading European governments to enact similar measures. Our sanctions also included a visa ban for officials above the level of director general or colonel in the military. We also had to refrain from positive votes for Burma in international financial institutions. There was a whole package of measures. The Europeans enacted a few of those things but not all of them. The French company Total was very active still in Burma. And a few months later, I had occasion to brief Senator Feinstein herself on the situation in Cambodia. She drew the conversation around to the problem of Burma and said, "Well why did you impose sanctions? We never intended for them to be imposed. We just intended to send a warning." That really flabbergasted me. I said, "Senator, it was the law. You enacted a law that said if the human rights situation deteriorates we must impose sanctions." She seemed to be sort of taken aback. I found that really fascinating.

Q: What about the drug business in Burma during your time?

HUHTALA: It was as bad as ever. There were serious problems of narco-trafficking with collusion by the government. We had a small program going on through the UNDCP, United Nations Development Cooperation Program, doing crop replacement in Burma. We were contributing to that at that time and we had a small DEA office that was actually getting some cooperation from the Burmese police in halting individual shipments of drugs. During that period, in the '90s, the output of drugs from Burma was shifting away from heroin for the international market, to methamphetamines aimed primarily at the Southeast Asian markets. So the direct threat to the United States was diminishing. But nevertheless there were serious, serious problems there. There were major narco-traffickers allowed to live freely in Rangoon and to have investments. There were big banks and hotels in Burma that were complicit. We were tracking all of that pretty closely. We were of course refusing to certify Burma under the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, as required by law.

Q: What about relations between Thailand and Burma? What was happening there?

HUHTALA: They were tense and they were continuing to be tense. One of the main markets for the huge Burmese methamphetamine production was Thailand. In subsequent years the Thai society was deeply ravaged by the availability of cheap meth being sold in grammar schools on up.

Q: Could you explain what were these methamphetamines?

HUHTALA: It's a synthetic chemical that can be made in a bathtub. In the old days in Burma, in the '70s and '80s, the problem was heroin refineries just on the Burmese side of the Thai border which would take opium and refine it into heroin. The process gives off distinctive chemical signals, and you can see the smoke, so it was very easy to pinpoint where these refineries were. When they switched over to making methamphetamines, it became much harder. Meth production does not have nearly as identifiable a footprint. It is made in the form of pills which are easy to ship, very hard to detect, and it's highly addictive stuff. The users in Thailand were either swallowing it as pills or crushing it up and burning it and inhaling it. I guess that way it goes much more quickly to the brain. For the first time in history in Thailand, the segments of society that were being affected by illegal drugs were the middle and upper classes, not just the street people who used to smoke number three heroin. No, these were the kids of the movers and shakers in Thailand who were being affected. So it was a very serious challenge to Thai stability. There was also a continuing problems of refugees coming into Thailand from Burma, along with illegal workers and trafficking in persons (which is something we focused on a few years later). It was thus a very testy relationship.

Q: These things are all kind of dim but were there twin guerrillas or something like that?

HUHTALA: Yes, that was when I was in Thailand, a few years later. They were 12-year old twins from the Karen tribe who turned up in a refugee camp on the border. They made the news because they were cigar-smoking gurus to the people, who thought they were quasi-divine.

Q: By guerrillas, I mean guer as opposed to gor but we'll talk about that later when it comes up.

HUHTALA: So that was Burma. Maybe I should just go through the countries because there were five countries and every one of them was busy during that period. Thailand had an elected, democratic government; the Thai Democratic Party came into power in the fall of '97. They were also engaged in a serious process of constitutional revision. A new constitution came into place in the fall of '97 which was very democratic. It guaranteed many civil rights to the people of Thailand as well as a counter-corruption commission and a lot of new rules about how parties could be formed. It was a genuine democratic ("small-d" democratic), pro-human rights effort and a major step forward. Unfortunately, in July 1997 the Thai currency, the baht, fell dramatically. The baht had been heavily overpriced and was a tempting target for international hedge funds. Its sudden fall caused serious problems for Thailand and triggered a massive East Asian financial collapse.

Q: This hit from Japan down to Burma, I mean down through Thailand.

HUHTALA: Down through Indonesia too but it hit in Thailand first. The fall of the baht was the catalyst that prompted the whole thing. As I say, this had been predicted; our embassy knew that the baht was unsound and would probably fall pretty soon. What was not predicted was the fact that it spread through the whole region and how quickly it spread. For the first few months of the crisis, for the summer and fall of '97, the U.S. attempted to deal with this through the World Bank and the IMF. The approach was to let the financial institutions proceed as they normally would, and the IMF offered some loans but with very stiff conditionality attached to them. In Thailand meanwhile, the baht continued to sink like a stone. The United States wasn't providing any direct financial assistance even though Thailand was a treaty ally, a country that we'd been friends with for 40 years. The only thing we did directly was to arrange some bridge financing through the Board of International Settlements, BIS, to help them get through to their first tranche of IMF lending. Our direct assistance was very small.

Q: Was this, I'm just trying to think here, around sometime in the decade or so during the Clinton administration we came in with a loan guarantee or something for Mexico.

HUTALA: Yes, that was earlier in the decade.

Q: But that in a way set up a benchmark. I imagine that was on your mind.

HUHTALA: It did, it kind of raised expectations because again the Mexican economy crashed in, I want to say, 1993, '94, something like that.

Q: Something like that. It was quite early on I believe.

HUHTALA: The U.S. assisted Mexico at that time. This is directly relevant because we came in with a major financial contribution. The Congress didn't like that so they enacted a law that said we could not make a direct financial contribution to a country whose economy was crashing unless Congress approved it. This in fact was one of the reasons we didn't move more directly to help Thailand in the fall of '97. We had this Congressional restriction which was due to expire at the end of that fiscal year, i.e., on September 30, 1997. The Thais didn't understand that very well, they only saw that we'd come to the aid of Mexico but now we were not coming to their aid. Other countries, notably China and Japan, did provide direct financial assistance; I believe China gave them a billion dollars. Of course Japan was affected subsequently, and South Korea was hit very hard by this crisis. The U.S. was seen as way too slow off the mark.

So by the end of the year the Thai baht, which had been trading at 25 to the dollar before the crash, hit 56 to the dollar. People's livelihoods were wiped out. Students in American universities suddenly had their tuition effectively doubled and had to withdraw in the middle of the year. People in Thailand, ordinary people, had to pull their kids out of school. Executives lost their jobs, rich people were selling their furs and their Mercedes at rock bottom prices. It was a drastic hit to the economy there. I will never forget that fall. I'm no economist, but I kept trying to get the economic bureau involved and get the folks at NSC looking at this. This was a major crisis hitting our friend and ally at the same time as they had a new government in place trying to go further down the road of democracy. This was not a good equation. I remember the week before Christmas, finally, a cable came out from the Undersecretary for Economic Affairs through the EB bureau tasking all the embassies in the region for analysis. It read something like, "We've just come to the realization that there is a serious financial crisis going on in Asia. We want your analysis. How did it happen? What steps should be taken?" This struck me as ridiculous. It was the third week of December, the crisis was six months old, and the due date for this long report was December 24th. Unbelievable. The embassy in Thailand, which had been frantically reporting for months and months, sent in a one-line response referring the Department to its major reporting and analysis cables. It cited all of its reports through the fall, perhaps ten excellent cables that they had sent in. But fortunately, the exercise caught the attention of Stu Eizenstadt the Undersecretary for Economic Affairs. It was good that people of his calibre, including his counterparts in Treasury who were very senior, had finally focused on what was happening in Thailand.

By January 1998 the President had realized that that were political stakes here too, that we were seen as deserting a friend. He invited Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai for an official visit in March. Mr. Eizenstadt led a big interagency effort to put together an assistance package for Thailand that would show them that we are still their friend and we really did care. The package included things like loan guarantees and OPEC contributions and keeping the Peace Corps in Thailand. There was not a whole lot of direct financial contribution but there was one really interesting part of it. Thailand had signed on to buy a squadron of F-18 aircraft for their Navy. Of course these are very expensive pieces of hardware and now they wanted out of the deal. We'd never allowed a country to back out of a deal after they'd signed the letter of offer and committed to buy it through FMS. But Thailand could not afford, financially or politically, to go forward; they needed to get out of this. I believe it was around a \$25 millions dollars commitment. It had not been a great idea in the first place for them to buy these aircraft; they probably didn't have an operational need for them but there was something of an arms race always going on in Southeast Asia and their Navy wanted this sexy new plane. When they'd signed the contract, several years before, their economy was going strong, and it didn't look like it would be a problem. Now it was.

Q: Because we have domestic people who, I mean the military wants to sell the plane.

HUHTALA: Boeing had a production line going in St. Louis so there were a lot of factors at play there. We were pressing the Interagency to agree to this letting Thailand off the hook, but the Pentagon was resisting it. Then one of the F-18s in our Marine inventory went down in the Persian Gulf, shot down or had an accident or something. The Marines were saying, "Well, we'd like to have those F-18s that are about to come off the assembly line. We can use them. They're committed to Thailand but you know we could use them." Eventually a deal was brokered. It took the involvement of the White House to lean on the Pentagon and it took a lot of Congressional work as well because Congress had been notified of the sale so Congress had to approve of the change. And again, no country had been let off the hook before on a purchase of this kind. But it was finally accomplished. This was the major "deliverable" for the Prime Minister's visit to Washington in March of '98.

Q: Two things, first you say the EB bureau, in other words the economic branch of the State Department asked for analyses of this. Had they been talking, was this just something that sort of originated maybe at the very top because somebody panicked all of a sudden?

HUHTALA: There was an element of panic to it. I had the clear impression that nobody had been reading the mail. The embassy in Bangkok had been reporting on this brilliantly for many months. The messages have just sort of sunken under the waves; no one was paying any attention. When they finally did focus on it, it was late in the year and there was a panicky recognition that we did indeed have a crisis on our hands. It was very disappointing to me that it took such a long time. As a result, to this day, the man on the street in Thailand thinks that the United States is not a reliable friend because we let their economy be destroyed. They ran through their entire government reserves, spending them completely before December of that year trying to shore up the baht. Where was their friend America? No where to be seen. Now that perception is not entirely accurate; we were active behind the scenes. We contribute 25% of the IMF budget and at our urging, the IMF was extending credit to them. But that's not how it played politically. Politically it was just a disaster for the relationship.

Q: What was the cause of this, I mean I've heard in Indonesia and Japan there was this overly cozy relationship between the banks which were lending out money and to the people they were lending to, they were all intermixed and all. It was I suppose cozy relationship is the only thing one can see. But in Thailand was this also?

HUHTALA: There was crony banking, definitely. The big banks were owned by the same Sino-Thai families as the big corporations. The baht had been pegged to the dollar for too long of a time. The U.S. dollar was weakening during the '90s and the baht had been pegged at 25 to the dollar for at least ten years. That had gotten out of sync, it wasn't realistic. There were huge amounts of dollar-denominated lending within Thailand; if there was a sudden switch to baht the loans would be unaffordable. There was a lot of money going around the planet in night time trades on the global market. And investors like George Soros were involved in the currency speculation.

Q: He was major villain of this I think.

HUHTALA: He was considered to be so, primarily by Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia who was very, very bitter against the English and the U.S. He was also biased against the Jews, and since George Soros is Jewish he claimed that the financial crisis was no accident; it was an out-and-out deliberate attempt on the part of the West to manipulate those economies and bring them down because we didn't like seeing Asian countries succeed. Which is nonsense, but that kind of stuff was being said in Thailand as well and people were believing it.

Also the IMF conditionality was too harsh for this situation. The IMF had developed its approach in dealing with bankrupt countries in Africa and other places and they always imposed recommendations on the amount of fiscal deficit a country could carry. They were quite unrealistic in the case of Thailand trying to recover from this crisis. As time went on the IMF modified its conditions maybe three or four times as they learned that their model was not applicable and that it was not working. This process built up huge resentment among Thai elites against the IMF as well as against the United States. The Thais were very happy when they were finally able to pay off all their IMF loans and they don't want to ever go there again (which is unfortunate). So the IMF itself lost a lot of credibility and prestige. I believe this also happened in South Korea and other places affected by this crisis. It was a very painful period.

Q: Did you find that the East Asia Bureau, was it able to quickly grasp the enormity of what was happening?

HUHTALA: Yes, but there was a lot of other things going on at the same time. That was I think, one of the problems with the crisis; it was hard to make this issue heard in the babble of all the other things that were happening. For instance we were having huge political problems in Cambodia at the time. We were in the process of normalizing relations with Vietnam and negotiating a trade agreement. I know there were a lot of things going on in our relations with China. When the South Korean economy began to crumple, I think this was seen as a more of an immediate problem in the region because it was a bigger economy and had bigger trade with the United States. Southeast Asia, it took a while for it to really register on people's minds.

Q: I told you I had a friend who was economic counsellor in Thailand earlier on, was saying that he got very much involved in tobacco matters. Did tobacco come up as an issue?

HUHTALA: Not at this time, though Thailand has traditionally been a big producer of tobacco. Backup a little bit, in the fall of 1996, President Clinton made a state visit to Thailand. He had gone out to Manila for the APEC meetings and then he went on to Thailand. That was the occasion for the signing of a bilateral trading and investment agreement that had been 14 years in the negotiation. Your friend was probably involved in that. Tobacco was an element of that agreement. We were able to successfully use the fact of the state visit to nudge the Thais to finally sign it.

Q: Well with Thailand, I mean this obviously, when your economy starts to go down so rapidly, this absorbs everybody's attention. Were there other issues?

HUHTALA: Of course.

Q: Cambodia?

HUHTALA: Yeah, they were involved in Cambodia. On Burma too they were key players. It's just that the Thai-U.S. relationship basically is a very solid one and it kind of goes along on auto pilot. In BCLTV, because we had amalgamated two offices, Thailand which once represented an entire country desk office in EAP, now was one of five countries covered. It was by far the most important relationship to us and our biggest economic relationship but it had one desk officer. The director (myself) and the deputy director were often focused on the crises in country like Burma. These political wranglings, should we impose sanctions for instance, had sort of a life of their own in Washington, inside the Beltway. But really when you get right down to these questions were not nearly as important to our relationship with Thailand, and the U.S. standing around the world as a reliable ally. The U.S. Ambassador to Thailand at the time felt very unhappy about this.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

HUHTALA: Will Itoh. He felt that EAP and State Department was ignoring the problems of Thailand partly because we only had one desk officer. Now I thought that was kind of unfair because I was very concerned about Thailand. I was constantly ringing the bells trying to get people to focus on the financial crisis. It wasn't just the fact that you only had one O3 desk officer looking after Thailand, but unfortunately that O3 was not my strongest officer. He wasn't as responsive to his embassy as he should have been so the Ambassador got the feeling that we were ignoring it. Even more important was the negative feeling that the leaders of Thailand developed toward the U.S. in those painful six months before we really engaged.

Q: How about the NSC,, were they sort of the EA representative, was this a matter again of getting their attention?

HUHTALA: Partly. They'd been very active in the organization of the state visit the previous year but during those months of late 1997 they were very focused on Cambodia, which was deteriorating rapidly. The human rights directorate in the NSC was I think more focused on Southeast Asia than the East Asia directorate. That was unfortunate. They were worried about human rights in Burma, illegal logging in Thailand and in Cambodia, refugee issues, democracy, issues which are not unimportant but don't represent the totality of our interests.

Q: Were there any insurgent movements? I'm thinking about down near the Malaysian border and then up in the north.

HUHTALA: No, by that time, and this is interesting, those insurgencies had pretty much died out. China had ceased its support in the early '80s for all of these communist insurgencies in the region and they were finished. So the "communist terrorists" that I knew about when I was in Chiang Mai, those were a thing of the past. The Burmese Communist Party was dying out or maybe it had already died by then. In southern Thailand the perennial restlessness of the Muslim population was in a period of quietude. In fact Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia had gotten together with Prime Minister Chuan of Thailand and they effectively buried the hatchet. Mahathir called on the Muslim inhabitants of Thailand to stop causing troubles, implicitly acknowledging that the rebels had received support from Malaysian sources. The organizations down there, the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) and other rebels in southern Thailand had pretty much degenerated into small time banditry. We thought we had turned the corner on that; we thought it was going to be all right. Thailand and Malaysia were cooperating on a patch of the Gulf of Thailand where there were considerable oil deposits that they had agreed to develop jointly. They'd been contesting ownership over it for many years, but now they had decided to develop it jointly and they were building a pipeline; the pipeline was going to come through southern Thailand and then down into Malaysia. Ten years ago the south was not in trouble, though of course that is not the case today.

Q: Let's talk about Cambodia.

HUHTALA: Okay. Cambodia, oh my God.

Q: This would be '96 to

HUHTALA: We're still talking 1996 to '98.

Q: '96 to '98 okay.

HUHTALA: When I had left VLC in '92 Cambodia was under UN mandate and they were on their way to free elections; it was a budding democracy. When I returned in '96 it was becoming a real mess. By that time, Cambodia had a system of two co-prime ministers co-existing uneasily, Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen, who had never really lost power.

Q: He was the man who had originally been put in by the Vietnamese.

HUHTALA: The Vietnamese, that's right and he headed something called the Cambodian People's Party. Prince Ranariddh was the son of Prince Sihanouk, who became King Sihanouk after the 1993 elections. Prince Ranariddh headed up the royalist party called FUNCINPEC (it's a French acronym). Besides the two co-prime ministers, there were dual ministers heading up several key ministries, including Interior and Foreign Affairs. The rest of the ministries were sort of divided between the two parties. It was supposed to be a functioning government, but of course this was recipe for real instability, and it did not work very well. There was a lot of rivalry isolated violence.

In addition, the Khmer Rouge were still out there. In fact the first month that I was on the job, in August of 1996, the Khmer Rouge remnants around the country announced that they were all going to turn themselves in to the government to be peacefully demobilized and the ongoing insurgency was going to end. This was a great thing but it left open the question of what do you do about the Khmer Rouge leaders who were still out there. Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Khieu Sampan and other truly bad guys who had perpetrated the horrible genocidal regime in the 1970s. Ieng Sary cut a deal that fall of '96 with the government to escape any prosecution. He rallied to the government and in exchange was given control of the area of Cambodia near the Thai border including the town of Poipet. This town had a lot of gem resources and drug running and who knows what else. It became a sort of Khmer Rouge fiefdom in the very questionable deal that had been reached.

We had a full Embassy in Cambodia by this time, including an aid program and we were trying to help move them towards democracy. There also were U.S. NGOs present helping to write their constitution and a nascent American Chamber of Commerce. We were trying very hard to help Cambodia move forward. In the spring of 1997 Secretary Albright was planning a visit to Cambodia. She was due to go to Hong Kong for the July 1 handover of power to the People's Republic of China and planned to visit both Vietnam and Cambodia while she was in the region. We were trying to negotiate the details of her Cambodia stop, but our ambassador, Ken Quinn, was arguing against it out of security concerns. Right about then, in May, open fighting broke out in the streets of the capital, Phnom Penh, and a rocket landed in the backyard garden of our ambassador's residence. That sort of put the kibosh on the idea of the Secretary of State coming into town. We were still trying to negotiate a stop at the airport. We were hoping that the two co-prime ministers would come and meet with her and she could lecture them and tell them to get their act together and stop feuding and try to have a government that works because obviously theirs was not working. Our DS people of course, our diplomatic security, absolutely refused to have her come into town. The government was arguing back that the capital was perfectly safe and she should come to the Interior ministry for her meetings. We were proposing a meeting in the diplomatic receiving room of the Phnom Penh airport. In the end Hun Sen flatly refused to meet at the airport, so the stop was cancelled.

On July 5, warfare broke out on the streets of Phnom Penh, the two sides fighting each other with tanks and military force. At first it was called a coup; it looked as if Hun Sen had decided to eliminate his rivals and just seize power. But at the same time we had evidence that Prince Ranariddh's people had been the first to put tanks on the streets so, it was a very murky situation, really hard to tell what was what. We were very concerned about the American citizens there who were gathering in a ballroom at one of the hotels. Ambassador Quinn went and spoke to them and rallied them and this was a good thing. He also got in his diplomatic vehicle and went around the streets of Phnom Penh looking for politicians that he could bring together, which I didn't think was such a great idea.

We had set up a task force of course. The call had come in to me from the Ops Center on that Saturday night and I said, "Fine, we'll set up the task force." I took the first shift (midnight to 8:00 am) rather than call my people in; they were summoned to start on Sunday morning. Those first hours, it was terrifying. A gas station right next to our embassy had been hit; there was a huge pillar of black smoke visible on CNN amid great confusion. Our Ambassador could not be reached immediately because he was out there looking for politicians. It was not a good situation. Several days into this crisis, Thailand sent in a C-130 to evacuate its nationals and offered us room on the plane. We did not take it because the Ambassador said, "No, we don't need to do that." Thus that opportunity to get people out easily fell through. Our military started putting together plans for what they call a NEO, a non-combatant evacuation operation. They brought in a huge task force and set it up in Thailand (again, our good ally Thailand) at the Utapao air base. They began assembling a huge force to go in and evacuate our people by force if necessary. Still the Ambassador was opposed to any draw down of official Americans. Finally we had to send an action memo to the Undersecretary for Management, Pat Kennedy, to order a draw down because it was evident the situation on the ground was way too unsafe. I still don't understand for sure why the Ambassador was opposing this. I think he was very concerned about the political signal this would send to the Cambodian government if we start taking our citizens out. In my opinion we had passed that point long ago.

Q: This thing of where you almost put your priority and the obvious thing has to be, you have to put American citizens ahead of diplomatic concerns.

HUHTALA: So this happened, but the result was the staff members who were evacuated were very, very unhappy, even more unhappy than evacuees are normally. It's very disruptive to have to pack up your family and leave suddenly in the midst of a crisis. But these people had been told by their Ambassador, "Don't worry, it's going to be fine, you're going to stay here," and then the mean old State Department ordered the evacuation. I went to a meeting that Pat Kennedy had with the evacuees in the State Department about a month after they had left post. They were all really opposed to what had happened and very, very disgruntled. It was really unfortunate. We were trying to help them, giving them allowances and trying to figure out when they could go back, and they were just furious at us.

Q: We've had, this is a perpetual thing. One, the situation when you're on the ground often doesn't seem as serious as is reported by the media and then in Washington we're all haunted by the idea that if you lose any Americans it's our fault. That's the motivator. We've done this during the Middle East; most people probably keep a suitcase packed.

HUHTALA: Yes, and for Cambodia it was a relatively new embassy and this had never happened before. In my opinion we should have gotten them out a lot earlier than we did. We eventually did do that. It just left a real residue of unhappiness, I think.

Q: Did you find that, had we lost our ability to play a role in Cambodia when all this was happening?

HUHTALA: I think we had been already in the process of losing that ability because Hun Sen is not a man that you can reason with. He's a real tough case. Although he wanted good relations with us if he could have them it wasn't essential to him, I think. When pressed, he would always choose his own political survival. I don't think that our having pulled our people out in the midst of that crisis mattered to him in the slightest. I really don't. What did matter to him was that we imposed economic sanctions. We announced right after the violence started that we were going to restrict our aid only to humanitarian purposes and we included our support for the Cambodian Documentation Center in that which was still tracing the victims of the Khmer Rouge genocide. Maternal child health projects, HIV/AIDS projects, de-mining, we were going to continue all of those but none of the bigger reconstruction efforts that we had been planning to do. For instance, helping the education ministry get on its feet and build schools. So we kind of took ourselves out of the picture that way because of what had happened. We went to great lengths not to call it a coup because if it had been a coup then that would trigger further steps according to U.S. law; besides it was not at all clear that what happened was a coup.

Q: What had happened?

HUHTALA: I've never known to this day exactly what happened but fighting broke out and Hun Sen and his party really seized that opportunity to chase the royalists out, basically. FUNCINPEC forces may well have instigated the fighting. Prince Ranariddh took refuge in Thailand and remained there for another year. After a lot of diplomacy, a lot of efforts, a group call the Friends of Cambodia was formed to sort of exert diplomatic pressure on them, including the U.S., Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Australia, Canada and others. The Cambodians agreed to have new elections, which took place in 1998, to try and get a new legitimate government because this dual headed government, this co-prime minister business had obviously failed.

Q: We had something like that in Laos way back. This was during the war; a communist, a royalist then a sort of in between.

HUHTALA: Yes, back in the '80s.

Q: Back in the '80s. What sort of role did the Vietnamese play during this?

HUHTALA: They were very concerned. Hun Sen was actually on vacation in Vietnam with his family when the balloon went up. This was taken by many Cambodians darkly, as an indication that the Vietnamese were behind it. But I'm convinced that they were as surprised as anybody else. That's why I tend to think that it was the royalists who started it; Hun Sen just capitalized on the opportunity. There are some people in Congress and elsewhere who think that Hun Sen is the devil incarnate and believe absolutely that he ordered this and that he was behind it. I just don't think he would have been on vacation deliberately when it happened. I really don't.

Q: Were our relations with the Vietnamese such that we could say, hey help us get this thing straightened out at that time?

HUHTALA: We did say that. We did ask for the help from all the countries in the region. They didn't particularly do much for us. I think they were worried about instability on their border. I think they had long since stopped viewing Hun Sen as their man. (Parenthetically, this is just interesting, our Ambassador, Ken Quinn, always talked with Hun Sen in Vietnamese, because Ken had served in Vietnam early in his career and spoke good Vietnamese though he didn't speak Cambodian. Hun Sen spoke Vietnamese from his days in exile there.) I've always discounted these claims of a Vietnamese role in the violence. After it had happened I think their main concern again was not having huge instability on their border.

Q: When you get right down to it the Cambodians and the Viets don't get along.

HUHTALA: No, they don't at all.

Q: You go back a millennium or two and they've been fighting over things. It's very much like saying, well Vietnam and China are as close as lips and teeth, they ain't.

HUHTALA: No, in fact that was always a big propaganda point for the Khmer Rouge, which remained politically active through this whole period. They were constantly accusing Hun Sen and his people of being Vietnamese sympathizers or proxies. I just don't think there was anything to that. The ironic thing about Hun Sen, is that unprincipled as he is, he's very pragmatic. He saw the writing on the wall that an election was going to be the next step, the way that he would legitimize himself. So he became an outstanding politician. All over Cambodia there are "Hun Sen Schools" that have been built. Remember I told you we no longer were assisting them with infrastructure. He saw to it that there were little country schools built all over the country and he went and personally inaugurated every single one of them and set up the CPP party office right next door; this was real classic, grass roots politicking. Whereas the royalists basically were spending all their time either in Paris or in Thailand and whining about what was happening and asking for assistance but they didn't do anything near that level of political organizing. When the elections happened in '98, Hun Sen's party won, and not entirely due to corruption, apparently. He is something of a democrat. This is the irony of it.

Q: What about Japan? Japan played a fairly significant role in Cambodia.

HUHTALA: The Japanese were very much involved and when we dropped the ball on our reconstruction assistance, for instance, they picked it up. They had a lot of large infrastructure projects going. They were also very active diplomatically. There was this organization formed call the Friends of Cambodia. Stanley Roth who was the Assistant Secretary for EAP was very instrumental in that, and he conferred with the Japanese a lot. They worked together to set this up. Ali Alatas, the foreign minister of Indonesia, was a leader in this group. So were the foreign ministers of the Philippines and Thailand. The group included the U.S., Japan, the Southeast Asian countries, Canada and the EU. We had several meetings of the group in Manila. It was instrumental in persuading Hun Sen to stop the violence and go down the path of having an election. We also persuaded him to allow Prince Ranariddh to come back into the country; the Prince was made President of the National Assembly instead of being co-prime minister. Even then he refused to back to Cambodia for the longest time so the National Assembly couldn't meet. He was just acting petulant and crazy. Late, when I was in Bangkok, the Ambassador and I went and called on him and urged him to go back and pick up his responsibilities. He was just not a statesman at all. So yes, the countries in the region, especially Japan, were very active in trying to salvage the accomplishment that we all had made through the UN process and through all of the assistance that had gone in.

Q: Did you find in our Congress particularly with maybe outside forces surrounding them, there are the professional Vietnamese haters, northern. Did they see Hun Sen as being the devil incarnate; were they somebody you had to pay attention to?

HUHTALA: The East Asia subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee had a hearing on this in July 1997. I'll never forget, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, a very outspoken member of that panel, said during the hearing that Hun Sen should be executed. I thought it was quite outrageous to say that about a head of state of a country that we recognize but that was his feeling.

I need to tell you too about another politician named Sam Rainsy. He represents a third party in Cambodian politics. He's a French citizen actually, as well as a Cambodian, educated in France, playing a very major spoiler role during all of these events. Also every time he felt personally threatened he would come into the embassy and ask for us to protect him. Ambassador Quinn would take him in and protect him. We finally worked out a policy whereby his Quinn's successor said to Sam Rainsy, "You are a French citizen and the French embassy is that way." Sam Rainsy was extraordinarily gifted in currying support in our Congress. He has presented himself as the only true democrat in Cambodia. He's not, by the way; he even has ties to the Khmer Rouge, but that is the image he projects. Every time an adverse event happens in Cambodia he rushes over to Washington and meets with receptive members of the House and Senate. Then the State Department is asked, "Why aren't you doing more to support Sam Rainsy?" It's a vicious circle.

On Easter Sunday of that year, '97, before the balloon went up in July, I was playing the hand bells at our church when I got a phone call. Sam Rainsy was organizing a protest outside a government building in Phnom Penh. He and his little crowd of supporters were doing their peaceful demonstration when they were set upon by persons unknown who fired grenades at them. One or two persons were killed and an American representative of the International Republican Institute, IRI, was wounded. Because IRI was involved, and because they all think that Sam Rainsy is the only true democrat in Cambodia, this became a huge issue on the Hill. Who organized a grenade attack? Who would do that? Must have been Hun Sen, they concluded. Personally I think Hun Sen would have been too smart to do that because these people had a permit and they were engaging in a legitimate activity.

But somebody clearly had attacked them, and it was important to find out who. In order to be helpful, we offered the services of the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) to look into this matter because an American citizen had been injured. The FBI sent in a special agent who talked to all parties, he heard all kinds of fantastic stories. Some pointed to Hun Sen, some pointed to Sam Rainsy himself. It was horribly murky as things usually are in Cambodia and it increasingly appeared there would be no way to determine what happened. It was not really a U.S. responsibility to do so but the FBI was lending a hand. Sam Rainsy meanwhile was really hoping that the FBI would issue a report saying Hun Sen was behind it. He really was pushing for that. The night that he was told by our Ambassador that we weren't going to be able to make that kind of a determination he stormed out of the embassy, furious, and denounced the whole process. The FBI agent concluded that his personal security was probably being compromised. He left Cambodia, went to Bangkok, and gave a press conference at which he was asked, "What is the conclusion?" There were Rainsy supporters there, maybe Rainsy himself, I don't remember, pressing him, "What did you conclude? Who was behind the grenade attack?" He said, "It's unclear, we can't come to a determination," and then returned to Washington.

Out of this grew the myth of the "FBI report." Rainsy and others claimed that the agent had submitted a report, that he had made a decision but it was secret, and he wasn't going to share it. In fact, all the agent had was his notes from interviews; there was never a formal report. Nevertheless we began to get insistent calls from the Congress to release to them the FBI's nonexistent report. What State did was refer the matter to the FBI. I don't remember whether the FBI ever shared those interview notes or not. All of this occurred during the build-up that awful spring when the Secretary was trying to get a trip arranged and tensions between the two co-prime ministers were coming to the point of ignition. Rainsy was stirring the pot, and he continues to do this. If you ask many of our Members of Congress they will tell you that he is the one who should be the leader of Cambodia. He's a true democrat and Hun Sen is just a thug. We've never been able, I think, to get beyond that mind set with regard to Cambodia. It's true that Hun Sen is ruthless and opportunistic, and he's certainly no favorite of mine, but in many ways Rainsy is just as bad.

Q: What about Laos?

HUHTALA: In Laos, we had an Ambassador there of course. We had normalized in '91 and Wendy Chamberlin was our Ambassador, greatly beloved by the Lao people because years before she'd been a volunteer teacher there before she joined the Foreign Service. She spoke Lao and she had a very dynamic personality. Wendy tried very hard to move the Lao in the direction of opening up and liberalizing so that we could have stronger relations.

During that period we signed a bilateral trade agreement with Laos. The Lao were very anxious to have most favourite nation (MFN) status which is now called normal trade relations, NTR. They didn't have MFN at the time and they knew that they needed a trade agreement first to get it. The Lao delegation came to Washington and came into the first meeting to negotiate the bilateral trade agreement and the minister who lead the delegation said, "Where do I sign?" They were ready, so it was pretty easy to negotiate an agreement. Of course an agreement like that has to be ratified by the Congress and the Congress has to agree to give most favored nation status. At that time the Lao unfortunately were engaged in stupid human rights abuses. There was a group of Lao villagers who had converted to Christianity and there were American missionaries with them and they were caught reading the Bible in their homes. The Lao authorities clamped down and arrested the American missionaries, eventual expelled them and put the poor Lao in jail. Naturally a huge uproar in Congress ensued, as you can imagine. Wendy was there behind the scenes saying, "This is insanity. Do you or do you not want trade relations with us? Congress takes all of these things into account." The Lao said, "This has nothing to do with trade." Well guess what, it does. She was very frustrated. Also there was a Hmong insurgency, you know the Hmong people who had fought with the CIA during the war. There was an active remnant up in the hills that was still resisting the government. By this time we had sizable populations of Hmong resettled in the United States, many of them with citizenship.

Q: Some up in Minnesota.

HUHTALA: A lot in Minnesota, central valley of California and North Carolina, Senator Jesse Helms' home state. A group of them in their beautiful tribal costumes had paid a visit on him on New Years Day. He was enchanted with them. They were good citizens now and they had grievances about their homeland so he was very interested in their cause. I remember we were up in the Senate for a hearing. The budget committee had taken up the matter of whether or not we should grant MFN to Laos. On that very day - and I think this is just a coincidence - on that very day there was a delegation of Hmong in their bright red tribal outfits who had come up to the hill to lobby for support in general. They found out about the budget hearing and the two events sort of collided and it went off the agenda. We have never been able, to this day, to get normal trade relations with Laos because every time we get close the Lao authorities crack down in some way on either religious practice or human rights in general. That was frustrating, I have to say.

Q: Well let's then go to Vietnam.

HUHTALA: Okay, Vietnam. By this time we had completed the normalization process. One of the big efforts during my tenure in VCLTV was to get approval to open a consulate in Ho Chi Minh City. We already had our embassy set up in Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh is the major economic center in Vietnam, of course, and a very vibrant city.

Q: According to my lights I use to live there, it's called Saigon.

HUHTALA: Well a lot of the people there still call it Saigon too, but the official name is Ho Chi Minh City. It is amazing the hoops you have to jump through to get a new post set up, especially so in the '90s when we'd been closing so many posts and when the fiscal climate was so austere. But there was a real need to open up in Ho Chi Minh. We knew that the day it opened it would be number one or number two worldwide in terms of the backlog for immigrant visas. There were over a million American citizens of Vietnamese descent, many of whom had filed petitions for their relatives to come over.

We also still had the Orderly Departure Program going. And there was a new program for refugees; I use to call it Son of ODP but it was actually called ROVR, standing for something like Resettlement Opportunity for Vietnamese Returnees. It offered one more chance for people to apply for resettlement in the United States as refugees. The point of the Orderly Departure Program for years had been to interview people in camps in third countries, find out if they had any grounds to apply for refugee status, and resettle them either to the U.S. or France or wherever they wanted to go. Those who remained in the camps, those who had been effectively screened out, had to go back to Vietnam. By 1996 they had done so, and the camps in Southeast Asia were all closed. The groups who advocated for refugees with our Congress had persuaded the State Department to offer one more opportunity and it was called ROVR. It involved going out to the communities where Vietnamese had been resettled and asking them questions and giving them one more opportunity to show that they should be allowed in. The conditions had been relaxed greatly so it didn't take much. Basically they just had to say "I really want to go." I was shocked to find out about this. I had hoped that by then we would have been able to put the question of refugee resettlement behind us because we had invested many years of effort, and I believed the people who truly faced retribution upon return had been resettled. Besides, the Vietnamese authorities resented it and it was very intrusive; it had the potential to make all our other programs, including immigrant visas, that much more difficult.

Q: Had by this time the re-education camps been pretty well finished?

HUHTALA: Oh long ago closed.

Q: So I mean you didn't have people sitting around in barbwire in camps.

HUHTALA: No, no that was all finished. That was one of the grounds for coming to the United States. If you'd been put through that re-education process you could claim refugee status, and we were taking people who had endured that. In any event, ROVR wasn't proceeding too smoothly. The Vietnamese were very tired of cooperating with us on refugee settlement for their people. We had problems getting access to interview them, especially people who'd settled in remote areas and in the highlands. They needed to have a Vietnamese passport before they came in for their refugee interview and local officials were slow to grant those passports. Money had to cross hands, and this was viewed as an outrage on the American side. So it was a very tricky set of issues. We knew that having a consulate Ho Chi Minh with a refugee officer posted there would help very much in the effort. We also wanted, frankly, the demonstration effect of a consulate that was issuing NIVs and immigrant visas so that it would be clear to all concerned that there were other ways for people to come to the United States. If they had a brother or sister in the United States they could get a petition and they could get a visa. We wanted to move it away from the refugee platform to a more normal relationship. We also had growing commercial interests down there in the south.

It took me about a year to get the post opening memo approved. You wouldn't believe the page full of clearances I had to get from around the whole Building. But we did finally get the authority to open the consulate in Ho Chi Minh on the grounds of our old embassy in the middle of town. The first thing we did was to raze the old embassy building, which had been iconic, seen in so many images as a symbol of American failure in Vietnam. We still owned the property so we tore down the old building and made plans to build what was eventually a very attractive consulate on the property. Because of the fiscal austerity at the time, we were not able to get a classified post; it's only an unclassified post. I remember arguing, this is still a communist country; this is still a counter-intelligence threat country. It did not seem like a good idea to be without classified capabilities in the consulate. Every time we had any information to share with Hanoi we were going to have to send an officer up to Hanoi, which is what has happened. It was primarily for cost reasons that we didn't include classified communications. The idea was, if we find ten years down the road that we need to have classified operations there we can add on a story on top of the building. What has happened now, ten years down the road, is that the need for classified communications has become obvious so they are building a classified annex, rather than something on a top story. It has probably been much more expensive to do it this way.

Q: What was your impression of what were we getting from reports about whether the Vietnamese government was at this time still an elderly group of people and that where did it seem to be going?

HUHTALA: They seemed to be going down the same path that China had trod in the previous decade of opening the country economically but trying to maintain political control. I think they will have about as much success at that as China is having, obviously. The relationship with the United States was definitely warming. We were negotiating a bilateral trade agreement which I think was eventually signed in 2001. The negotiations were very serious while I was on the desk there. Attached to that too was the promise of our support for Vietnam's entry into the WTO (World Trade Organization). We were telling them that the draft trade agreement was a tough document (from their point of view) because we were applying WTO standards, which would make it easier in the long run. If they concluded the BTA (bilateral trade agreement) with us it would make it easier for them to get into the World Trade Organization.

We also began to normalize the military relationship during this time. A deputy assistant secretary of defense, Kurt Campbell, led a delegation to Hanoi in October of 1996, and I was on that delegation. It was fascinating. We met with the minister of defence on the Vietnamese side and all of his generals on one side of the table and Kurt Campbell and the ambassador and the military attaché and a Pentagon delegation on our side of the table. We began the process of moving towards formal mil-mil ties.

Q: What does that mean?

HUHTALA: It meant for instance, there was a whole menu or whole roadmap (dare I say) of agreed-upon steps that were going to take place. We were going to start with exchanging visits to military schools, for instance our National War College was going to send some students out the following spring. Then we were going to have experts go back and forth. At some point farther down the road there would be an exchange of visits of ministers of defense. We would have a U.S. ship visit at the end of it. It was all laid out. It was interesting, there is an English language newspaper that is published in Hanoi, it's a very thin document and it's not very interesting, it's of course government controlled. At the time it was the only thing available in English. On the very first day of our delegation's visit, a copy of this paper was delivered to our hotel rooms and lo and behold, on the front page was a picture of a big warship calling at Cam Ranh Bay, saying what a nice place this is for military ports of call. A very unsubtle signal, I think, towards our side. In any event, those were good talks. They were not very acrimonious. We talked about the POW/MIA effort ongoing because for us that's fundamental. The Vietnamese side promised to continue to work on that. Then we had a banquet. It was a good start.

Q: Tell me how much did, when one thinks about this, Cam Ranh Bay is a damn good place, the port of port. The Russians use it as a calling station on their way when they sent their fleet around in 1901, I don't remember, during the Russian Japanese war. I would think of all the places around it would be a damn good place to be able to use for our ships. Was that something that developed, that our military was considering?

HUHTALA: You know we never really pursued that. They were obviously dangling it. We did eventually have ship visits, I think we've had two so far, but I don't think either one of them was at Cam Ranh Bay. The first one was at Ho Chi Minh City and then I think maybe Da Nang. Is that near Cam Ranh Bay?

Q: It's above it. It's not really much of a port.

HUHTALA: I think our military's been trying to signal, thank you very much but that is not our main interest. Right now we are trying to negotiate an IMET (International Military Education and Training) agreement to train with them and promote inter-operability and coordination. That concept was still very far down the road back in '96.

Q: Well in '96 and '98 were things like the Spratly and other areas, I mean this is sort of in your bailiwick, kind of.

HUHTALA: The Spratlys and the Paracels, those islands in the South China Sea, are claimed by five or six countries but not by the United States. Our position has always been that we will support whatever settlement the claimants come up with. There have been little skirmishes every once and a while between the Chinese and the Vietnamese. But that is not an issue that directly affects us.

Q: It didn't?

HUHTALA: No. So that was a good development. That was the year, late 1996, early '97 that we finally reached the point of exchanging ambassadors. Le Van Bang, who I talked about before, was in Washington as Vietnam's chargé d'affaires when I came back on to the desk; he returned to Hanoi to be given the official portfolio as ambassador to the United States. The president nominated Pete Peterson to be the first American ambassador to the unified Vietnam. Pete Peterson was a brilliant choice. He was a Congressman who had been a prisoner of war, held in the Hanoi Hilton for six years along with John McCain and others; a verifiable war hero, somebody with every reason to be bitter towards the Vietnamese but who was instead very focused on the new, positive relationship. He was an outstanding first ambassador. His nomination was difficult to confirm because of holdouts in the Senate opposed to normalizing relations with Vietnam. It was a long and difficult battle and we didn't get approval until, my recollection is that it was around April of '97.

Q: What did you ascribe, looking at it the opposition to relationship with Vietnam, within both Congress and the greater body politics?

HUHTALA: It's the same old story. This is the war that we didn't win, it was a national trauma. And the country is still communist, so why did we want to have relations with them? Our answer to that was to note that for many years the Soviet Union was still communist but we had relations with them, we'd never broken off relations with the Soviets. Diplomatic relations is not a reward for good behavior. It's an agreement to talk to someone and to have exchanges. We made all of those arguments. Some of the people who were most adamant in opposing Pete were very worried still about the POW issue and were being fed arguments by the League of Families and others that Vietnam was still not cooperating fully.

Q: Tell me, I mean this whole area you dealt with from Thailand to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, what was your involvement with POW thing at that time?

HUHTALA: There was an office set up in the Pentagon called DPMO, Defense POW/MIA Office. We provided a lot of support to them, as did the embassy in Hanoi. There was a detachment in Hanoi that was still conducting many different recovery activities every year. We attended and spoke at the annual conferences of the League of Families who were still very resistant to the fact that we had normalized. The issue had taken up a life of its own. The search for remains was primarily a military activity, but it was also, always, the first talking point in any discussion we ever had with the Vietnamese. They understood that this developing, mutually beneficial relationship was founded on continuing cooperation on POW/MIA.

Q: Were they as well responding to or saying well you help us?

HUHTALA: Yes they were. They were saying that while the U.S. had 2,500 still unaccounted for, Vietnam had 30,000. Will you help us? We coordinated with the Pentagon and there was some information provided by DOD to the Vietnamese to help them locate their missing. In Vietnamese culture, if a loved one has died and you aren't able to find the body and bury it and pray over it then the soul wanders in limbo forever. That's what they believe. So this was a very painful issue for them.

They were also raising the issue of Agent Orange at this time. They were very unhappy that we had given compensation to our Vietnam vets who had been exposed to Agent Orange but we had offered nothing at all to the Vietnamese. They have a very high incidence of birth defects and problems, even now into the third generation, that they attribute to the use of Agent Orange in napalm during the war. We have never been prepared to provide any kind of compensation for them, but in the late '90s we were offering to set up a bi-national Science and Technology Commission to look into it. There was a need to figure out, if we could, what the baseline exposure to dioxin had been like in Vietnam before the war and then what, if any, had been the accumulated effects of our use of Agent Orange. More importantly, what could be the right treatment for the genetic damage that was claimed to have occurred in the population (it has never been proven). A lot of fundamental scientific questions needed to be answered; for example, there could be a lot of other reasons why children were being born with deformities. We didn't know yet. This became a big issue in the bilateral relationship.

Q: Yellow rain, was that a dead issue?

HUHTALA: No, that was dead. That was in the '70s. Claims of yellow rain or aerial poisoning had been pretty much debunked.

Q: Did you, when you were looking at Vietnam as an issue, how did you see the economy developing and what were we sort of predicting for the whither of Vietnam?

HUHTALA: The economy was doing very well. They had not been terribly affected by the Asian financial crisis because they still weren't very well integrated into the regional economy. I don't remember what the growth rate was but it was impressive, and the population was growing fast too. They'd gotten up to I believe around 70 million at that point. A lot of our companies were interested in investing. They were having problems, as they did in China, and that's why the BTA was so important. It was going to get us agreement on things like intellectual property protection and the rights of investors and the ability of foreign companies to come in and really participate in the economy. There was a lot of oomph behind the effort to get the BTA negotiated because it was seen as having tremendous potential. It still is seen that way.

Q: Were we seeing the same situation that, you know better than I, correct me if I'm wrong, that was happening in China where you had the government ruling but things had evolved into sort of almost corrupt money lords or something. Provincial rulers were allowing the economy to take a life of its own.

HUHTALA: I'm not sure how much of that took place in China but that's not my field really. In Vietnam there was certainly corruption. There were problems, but sense was that it was not out of hand. The country was going through a process they call "doi moi," which means renovation. They were trying to effect economic reforms and open up the country to the outside. They were buying American jet planes for their national airline. They were trying to come into the mainstream economically, not politically but economically. They joined ASEAN in this period (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations). In general, they were becoming good citizens in the region, both politically and economically.

Q: Last question, you were there when the Vietnamese set up their embassy?

HUHTALA: Yes.

Q: It's always difficult to set up an embassy. Did we help get them started?

HUHTALA: We had been managing their property for years. We had seized it during the war, so now we renovated it and turned it over to them in the mid '90s. It's a beautiful building there on R Street. They did fine by themselves. You have to respect the Vietnamese, they are smart and able and Le Bang turned out to be a fabulous leader for the first embassy.

Q: I'm just thinking, I'm off in a few minutes to meet a friend of mine and we're going to have lunch at the Eden Center where they still fly the South Vietnamese flag. Did you have a problem with, here in northern Virginia we have a very large, very active, the Vietnamese are a very capable group of people but they have certainly not accepted the new government.

HUHTALA: Some of them have, actually. There are all kinds of Vietnamese Americans here and some were very supportive of what we were doing. Others to this day have not accepted it. There's been a continuing problem of Vietnamese communities around the country passing local statutes calling for the flying of the old South Vietnam flag or giving grief to the Vietnamese leaders and diplomats that come through. They demonstrated against Pete Peterson in southern California. The Vietnamese authorities have a very hard time understanding why we allow this. Now that we have diplomatic relations they believe we should not allow anybody to insult them. They don't really understand our system and the right of free speech that people have in this country.

Q: But anyway you didn't find this as a group that you were particularly worried about security and all that, of the Vietnamese diplomats?

HUHTALA: Not here in Washington. They eventually set up a consulate in San Francisco and they've been the target of some problems there. California has a very high number of Vietnamese citizens.

Q: Well we'll stop at this point and where did you go?

HUHTALA: Bangkok.

Q: Okay, so we'll pick it up in Bangkok in '98.

Today is the 18th of November 2005. Marie, what does Bangkok mean?

HUHTALA: What does the town mean; the name of it? Well that's the English name. It was named after a little village south of present day Bangkok, I think it means "village of the wild plum." But the true name of Bangkok in Thai starts with "Krung Thep" and goes for about 15 words after that. Basically it means "city of the angels." Just like my birthplace, Los Angeles.

Q: Well now we have something in oral history . You were in Bangkok from '98 to when?

HUHTALA: To 2001. This assignment presented unique personal challenges, as my husband felt the need to remain in Washington and work on his career. As a foreign service spouse, he had moved here and there with me for years and was left with a very choppy resume. Now he had a good job in northern Virginia and didn't want to leave it. So I went unaccompanied and remained so until the last few months of the tour. It was hard; we missed each other a lot and really looked forward to our reunions every 6 or 8 weeks. Usually he crossed the ocean; he logged a lot of frequent flyer miles during that tour!

Another big event during this tour was the wedding of our daughter Karen to Sam Rulli in 1999. They were graduate students together at Tulane, and they had a lovely wedding in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

Q: What was your job in Bangkok?

HUHTALA: I was Deputy Chief of Mission.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

HUHTALA: First it was Will Itoh. He finished his assignment after about three or four months, and then Richard Hecklinger came in as ambassador.

Q: I've had a long interview with Will Itoh. Richard Hecklinger, what's his background?

HUHTALA: He was a career Foreign Service Officer. He had been a PDAS (Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary) in the economic bureau, EB, and also a DAS in the European bureau.

Q: Was this his first time in Asia?

HUHTALA: His first assignment in Asia, yes.

Q: Do you know what lead to his appointment there?

HUHTALA: Oh probably interdepartmental politics. I don't know.

Q: It has that feel. I don't know the man.

HUHTALA: He's a good example of somebody without strong ties to a regional bureau; even though he had been a DAS in EUR, he didn't have the kind of tie that I for instance had to EAP. Yet he was clearly a stellar officer and the Building wanted give him an ambassadorship and this is the one that he ended up with. He did a very good job in Bangkok, and I learned a great deal from him.

Q: Bangkok, well Thailand, how stood Thailand, what was the situation there, let's say political, economic and then American relations when you arrived?

HUHTALA: I got there in August of '98, a little over a year after the financial crisis had hit. As I explained last time, the initial U.S. response to that crisis was seen by the Thais as deficient, horribly disappointing to them, even though the visit of their Prime Minister Chuan to Washington in March of that year had helped. As I said we had put together a major assistance package, including forgiveness of the F-18 sale, so that helped a bit. Plus during that year the IMF had progressively adjusted its program in Thailand to take account of the realities on the ground there; for instance setting less stringent conditionality in terms of their fiscal deficit. Thailand was beginning to pull itself together economically although it still had a long way to go. Politically the government of Prime Minister Chuan was completing its first year in office. I was saying that the financial crisis was getting in the way of the government's efforts to enact its reformist pro-human rights agenda. Although they were still very strong on that, particularly the foreign minister, Surin Pitsuwan. He was an unusual leader. He was from the south of Thailand, the far south, and a Muslim.

Q: Down in that long peninsula?

HUHTALA: Down in the long peninsula, a place called Nakhon Sri Thammarat. He was a Muslim in a government overwhelmingly composed of Buddhists but he had a great deal of credibility as an intellectual and very charismatic leader. He was working very hard to advance human rights, for instance in Thailand's policy with Burma. The Chuan government took a fairly hard line against the dictators there. During that period there were a lot of border conflicts and political tensions between the two countries. The Thai Government supported what the United States was trying to do in terms of advocating for better human rights in Burma and around the world.

Q: Were we at all involved in the Burmese Thai conflict or not, either military advice or intelligence?

HUHTALA: It was a sporadic intermittent kind of conflict between the two countries. It never came to a declared war. A lot of it was police action on the border. Occasionally it erupted into out-and-out shooting across the border. This happened a couple of times while I was there. We were not directly involved in that although we were giving the Thai a lot of advice and support in trying to interdict the drug flow coming out of Burma, which was one of the main causes behind the tension between the two countries. Our DEA office up at Chiang Mai for instance gave a lot of help to the Thai police and to the Thai Third Army, which is based in the northern part of the country. We also had some assistance programs for the refugees in camps along the Burma border. The terrible human rights situation inside Burma had produced floods of refugees, primarily from the Karen tribe who are actually Christian. A lot of them were settling along the border; we were giving assistance directly and through NGOs.

Q: Bangkok is one of those huge embassies which not only is a huge embassy because of Thailand but because of its location. You're DCM so essentially you're the chief executive officer. Talk about the embassy and the challenges you faced in running it.

HUHTALA: Well it was our largest embassy in Asia and by some accounts our third largest in the world at that time, with 500 American employees and around 1,000 locally engaged staff. We had about 30 to 33 different agencies and offices. The way we counted it for instance, there was the Regional Information Management Center, RIMC, which was a State Department organization but it provided support for the IT operations in half the world so that counts as one of the units.

Q: IT meaning?

HUHTALA: Information Technology. We had a regional courier office, one of only three in the world (Bangkok, Frankfurt and one in the U.S.). Of course we had DEA and CIA and at the time I went there USIS was still a separate agency. INS had a district office headquartered there. Customs was there, Secret Service. I could go on and on. The FBI was there, and a pretty large military operation too. We had JUSMAG (the Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group), which dates back to the Vietnam war. We also had the headquarters for the regional Marine Company C, managing the Marine guards in all of the embassies in Asia. I'm sure I've forgotten more, but anyway as you can see it was a very, very large mission.

Q: Did we have a naval or a health thing or not?

HUHTALA: No, no that was in Jakarta, NAMRU. We had an army research organization, AFRIMS, Armed Forces Regional Institute of Medical Science. They were doing some very interesting work on pursuing a human virus for HIV/AIDS as well as and doing anti-malarial work. We also had an office of the CDC in Bangkok and it had a satellite office in the northern city of Chiang Rai.

Q: CDC being?

HUHTALA: Centers for Disease Control. They also were working on a separate effort to develop an HIV/AIDS vaccine. Also the CDC in Bangkok had developed, a few years earlier, something called the Bangkok Protocol, which became standard practice around the world for preventing mother-infant transmission of HIV. Thailand had been one of the countries very severely hit by HIV in the late '80s. It just exploded there. By the time I got there in '98 the Thai had cut the rate of new infections drastically. But they still had about a million people with HIV/AIDS, so they were concentrating on things like preventing mother-child transmission, and a very active public awareness campaign with very extensive use of condoms. It was really sort of a model case for a developing country coming to grips with HIV.

Q: Well this is just one little part of it. Was the fact that Bangkok had become at one point, I don't know if it was at your time, sort of the sex capital. German and Japanese tourists that are males arrived by the plane load and go out and have their fun and come back. This is a real disease problem.

HUHTALA: That's why HIV exploded so drastically in the late '80s. There was a thriving sex industry. A lot of people traced the development back to the Vietnam war period when a lot of American soldiers went there on leave. But it had grown far beyond that by the '80s. There were different social mores as well. It's a Buddhist culture, very tolerant. For men to go off for recreational sex didn't have the kind of social stigma that it would have in western cultures. Nevertheless, one of the great tragedies of the HIV epidemic was that men were bringing AIDS that they picked up in brothels home to their wives, this was a huge social problem. The revulsion against that caused a sea change of attitudes in Thailand.

Q: Again, not to draw on the subject, but this plus drugs used to hit pretty hard on American families, embassy and related groups for their kids, teenage kids. You had these sort of flesh pots, both sex and drugs. Was that a problem?

HUHTALA: It was still a problem by the time I got there but nothing like it had been in the '70s. Remember I'd been in Chiang Mai in the '70s and I'd heard a lot about what was going on in Bangkok. There were a lot of family members living in Bangkok with the father or husband away in Vietnam so there was a lot of unhappiness there. A lot of the kids of that era were turning to drugs. Thank God that was before the time of HIV/AIDS, but there were other diseases they were picking up. By the time of the late '90s things had changed; the active-duty U.S. military presence had been greatly reduced. Although these temptations were out there and we did have some problems among embassy family members, it was much, much less than I had feared it would be.

Q: Did you have problems running herd or trying, I guess trying to reduce the number of agent people there.

HUHTALA: There are always efforts to streamline operations. There was a big one that went on while I was there. The problem, in the case of Thailand, was that it made sense to locate a lot of our regional offices there. The cost of living was much lower in Bangkok than in Singapore or almost anywhere else in Asia, especially when you balance it against a very talented, very capable local work force. For instance, we had one of the State Department's three financial management centers there (the others were in Paris and Charleston). The people in this fairly large operation, mostly Thai, did all of the budgeting and vouchering and other financial accounting work for our posts from the Middle East to California. They did it extremely well, and since they were located in that part of the world they were able to interact real time with embassies in the region. So if the embassy cashier in Nepal had a hard time balancing her books, our person in Bangkok would call her up and talk her through it.

It made a lot of sense to have Bangkok as a regional hub. Not just the cost of living, but good living, excellent schools for dependents, a transportation hub, so easy to get flights in and out. We used to argue that to all the green eyeshade types coming through wanting to reduce our staffing. The Ambassador and I took a very hard look at any new requests for staffing under the NSDD-38 process. We did not just automatically approve anything. There were some requests that we turned down because there was a tendency in some agencies to just say, let's go to Bangkok, it's a nice place. Agencies had to justify why they wanted to have a presence there. We kept a finger on that. Essentially for the operations that were there, it was very logical to have them in Bangkok.

Q: What was your role there at the embassy?

HUHTALA: As DCM?

Q: Yeah. Some ambassadors use, I mean there are different styles of doing this.

HUHTALA: It was in many ways the biggest job I've ever had. There was a huge amount of coordination to be done. I worked closely with everyone one of those agency heads. We had regular meetings, and I would often be one of the first to figure out if there was a problem brewing and be able to take care of it before it even got to the Ambassador's level. A lot of this inevitably is interpersonal. One of the problems in a post like Bangkok is the presence of many different agencies who are not normally foreign affairs agencies. So we had personnel there who were not necessarily used to working and living overseas reporting in stovepipe fashion back to their agencies in Washington. That made it difficult to ensure proper coordination of our efforts as a whole.

Q: Explain what stove piping is.

HUHTALA: By stovepipe I mean, for instance, the FBI attaché^{1/2} would take his orders directly from Washington and report back to Washington and very little of it would be made known to the Ambassador, the DCM or the State Department. The kind of information and instructions that that attaché^{1/2} got could very well conflict with the ones the DEA attaché^{1/2} was receiving through his stovepiped channels, or maybe Secret Service. To help address that we used to have regular meetings of what we called the law enforcement committee. At least once a month we got every single law enforcement officer, including the State Department diplomatic security officer, together in the room and just went around the table and had every one of them explain what they were working on. Lo and behold, we'd discover a lot of synergies there and also iron out potential conflicts. By having all of these agency heads on an equal footing around the table it helped very much to reduce interpersonal conflict, jealousies and suspicions. Also they always knew each of them could come and talk to me any time they needed to and they did so, on issues as diverse as their housing situation or hiring local staff. I was there around the time that we had just set up in all of our embassies, a new formula for sharing administrative costs, called ICASS. Do you know what that is?

Q: No.

HUHTALA: It's Interagency Costs and Support Services. It replaced the older arrangement called FAS. Essentially what it meant was that all the agencies in an embassy were being billed for their share of the entire cost of running an embassy. In the old days the State Department provided the "platform," we paid the office building rent, we paid for the electricity, the heating, the cooling, all of that. New agencies would come in and pay a tiny portion of the services they were using. Now all of those costs were prorated across all of the agencies. The other interesting feature of ICASS is there were certain services that every agency had to sign on to. They all had to help pay for the Community Liaison Office and the medical clinic (except for the military, they had their own arrangement). But if they didn't want to take advantage of other services, like human resources or vouchering, they could opt out and find some other way to meet those needs. These were considered service centers or cost centers and we were providing them.

Most agencies took advantage of the services State offered because it was generally much more expensive to get it done on the outside. Now and then an agency would try that because everyone was always under pressure from Washington to cut costs. We would have monthly meetings of the ICASS Council and they could get acrimonious, especially when we were passing out the invoices for the year that agency heads were going to have to send back to their agencies. They would go over them with a fine-tooth comb and wanted to know why it is costing so much, for instance, to do vouchering.

The other problem was that in our Administrative Section, supposing we had ten people working on personnel. If an agency added three people more, okay we could handle that. Then another agency would add two more people and all of a sudden we'd passed the tipping point and needed to hire a new local employee, giving us 11 people doing that service. That would increase everyone's cost, since agencies would be paying their share of 11 salaries, not 10. So we had to explain those things and work through them very carefully. I worked really closely with our Administrative Counsellor in that process. Boy, I tell you, you really have to use diplomatic skills when working with your own agencies on money issues!

Q: Oh yeah, well that's where real diplomacy is. What was your impression, I mean you'd been in Chiang Mai before, what was your impression back to Thailand at basically the turn of the century?

HUHTALA: First of all I was so impressed with the progress it had made, even given the fact of the financial crisis. The standard of living was much, much higher, incomparably higher. There were beautiful paved roads all over the country now, big shopping centers, a lot of wealth, a lot of affluence. There were much higher levels of education, and politically they'd evolved so much. When I was in Chiang Mai in the '70s we had military coups every year in October when the military promotion list came out. In the intervening period Thailand had put military rule aside and embraced democracy. It was a fractious democracy, to be sure; it had too many parties and a lot of vote buying and other problems but it had made that big transition. That was really exciting and really, really interesting. I just loved it. I really enjoyed dealing with the Thais that we worked with. The professionals in the foreign ministry and the other ministries were very, very good, smart and well educated. They spoke such good English that I didn't really get to use my Thai professionally unless I went out into the countryside. When I was in Bangkok their English was much better than my Thai (which I had brushed up in a year of early-morning classes at FSI before I went to post).

Q: When you were there before in the '70s there was no Internet and the whole technology thing; how did you find within Thailand, then we'll talk within the embassy, but how did you find Thailand responding to the technical revolution, information revolution basically?

HUHTALA: In Bangkok and in a few of the larger cities they were making a lot of progress in that area. The Internet was available and widely used. It was a dial-up service, it wasn't really fast, but it was there and it was pretty reliable too. The Thai government wisely took a completely hands-off policy; they didn't try to control access to the Internet like some countries have done. Progress, however, was kind of shallow, due to the low level of both technological penetration and of English. In Bangkok it was easy to find people who could speak English, but if you went out into the countryside, it wasn't there. What that means was it was still not possible to train a work force in the entire Thai economy that could rise above farming, agriculture, and enter the world information society. That became really clear while I was there.

One thing the embassy did every year was to host a big, prestigious economic conference. We invited some of the best thinkers in the country to a beachside resort. This used to be funded by USIS, but now of course it's the State Department. Every year there was a specific theme. One of the years I was there the theme was the e-economy. It became very clear in our discussions that Thailand at that point, it must of have been around the year 2000, they did not yet have any laws allowing for e-commerce. They didn't have the kind of protection in place to allow people to buy things over a website, to make a deal, to use electronic signatures. All of these things, they sound kind of technical but they are really the basic building blocks for moving into an electronic economy. We realized that if Thailand didn't get its act together soon, it just wasn't going to make it. That combined with the very shallow level of English language instruction across the country was a real structural problem that we were calling to the attention of their leaders.

Q: I was wondering, we're talking now about a period where India was really becoming online as far as being a service country for the world practically because of the English and because of the technical training they were giving their people, so they were getting a very large foot in the door. I would have thought that Thailand would have seen this as a good model or something.

HUHTALA: They saw it and they were doing it but on a very small scale. There were people fortunate enough to come from the right families and to have graduated from one of their premier universities, like Chulalongkorn or Thammasat; these among the best in the world. People like that could handle all of this. The problem was they represented a very small proportion of the economy and of the country. There hadn't yet been a good solid effort to bring the whole country up to snuff. The education ministry was in a shambles. At that time there were two ministries, the ministry of higher education and the ministry of education in general. They didn't work together, and neither of them got much done. One of the reforms put through by the government was to merge those two ministries together so they would be more coherent. What happened was the bureaucrats in both ministries spent all of their efforts jockeying for place and rivalling each other and trying to make sure that their personal rice bowls didn't get broken. Nobody was thinking about the future of the country. This was very distressing to us, actually. The Ambassador and I embarked on a serious effort to teach the relevant Thai officials about the American community college system, which is an excellent way to train large numbers of people in the technical skills they need. Thailand already had a network of teacher training institutes that could be easily converted into community colleges. We sent a group of school administrators on a tour of the United States to visit community colleges and tried to plant seeds. There were intellectuals in Bangkok who got it, who understood that and thought they should move that way, but institutional resistance was very, very strong.

Q: It's interesting because Thailand could be a giant in that area because the people are industrious.

HUHTALA: Oh they are and they are smart and open to new ideas. Really the lack of English is a huge barrier. The countries that happen to have been British colonies have an educated English speaking population. This even includes Burma, by the way. They have a built-in advantage over countries like Thailand, which was never colonized and was proud of it, but has experienced very little penetration of foreign languages.

Q: While we're on communications, how did you find, I mean here you are in this huge embassy in an era where communications with everybody, you could call anywhere and any time. How did you find this as far as running things? Was this a pain in the neck?

HUHTALA: No, it was a huge advantage, it totally was. We had e-mail, both classified and unclass. We had IVG (International Voice Gateway) telephone lines to Washington through which we could access many other places in the U.S. The only problem was the 12 hours' time difference. If I wanted to have a serious discussion with Washington officials it probably was going to be at night time so I could catch people in their office. Ambassador Hecklinger used to do this almost every night. He would be calling in to folks and bouncing ideas off them; this was great, but the man was often really tired during the day.

Q: As I recall I wasn't down this far but I was in South Viet Nam and during the winter it is very cold there and I don't wear pajamas and standing by the phone at three in the morning with nothing on and somebody is happily talking about personnel problems or something this.

HUHTALA: The problem is some of these things can only be resolved over the phone. When I think back to my previous tours of duty I remember we didn't even have access to American television. We were so information deprived. When I was in Chiang Mai we had the USIS Wireless File, with which I followed the '76 presidential election. That was it. Now we had the International Herald Tribune everyday. We had Internet, we had CNN on cable television. It was a huge improvement. Of course that means that the news just comes at you real fast and you have to react all the time.

Q: Did you find yourself doing political reporting much?

HUHTALA: You know, as a political cone officer I was very careful not to do that. It's really important to let the political section do its job. I did a lot of political work, of course. I would call on ministry officials to discuss issues or make demarches but I would bring along a note taker from the political (or economic) section and they would do the work, they would do the reporting of it. I tried to that with all of the different sections, let them do their job but keep a close eye on what they were doing and try to monitor the quality of our output so that it would be the very best.

Q: The ambassador had an economic background?

HUHTALA: Yes he did.

Q: How did that work?

HUHTALA: It was ideal because as I say we were in a period of real financial crisis in Thailand and it was wonderful to have his insights. Not just substantively but also the fact that he knew the right people in Washington. He'd worked directly for the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs, Alan Larson, so he could call him and urge him to come visit, and he did so. Larson came and met with Thai leaders about the basic reforms they needed to put in place as a result of the economic crisis; for instance, they lacked a serious bankruptcy law, which they eventually did put in place. That was great. Ambassador Hecklinger and I kind of complimented each other in many ways. He was an economic specialist, I was political. He was not an Asia specialist, I was. He didn't speak Thai, I did. I think he was actually an outstanding Ambassador, he was very effective dealing with the Thais and he had great instincts.

Q: How did you, taking the temperature, how were things going America vis-a-vis Thailand after our lukewarm response to their crisis at the beginning? Were we rolling up our sleeves and getting on with it on both sides or not?

HUHTALA: We were chipping away at that. Remember some of this was a misperception by the Thai. It's not that we truly ignored them during the crisis; it's just that our response wasn't seen to be very fulsome because we chose for the first six months of the crisis to work through the international organizations. It was only in the beginning of 1998, really, when we began doing bilateral assistance that could be highlighted and pointed to. So the U.S. was kind of behind the curve in terms of public and even government perceptions.

Unfortunately in '99 there came another problem that got in the way of better relations. That was the race for the new head of the WTO, the World Trade Organization. Thailand had decided that it was time for it to step up in the world and assume a bigger profile in the international system, and specifically it was time for a Thai official to get one of the big international jobs. Their deputy prime minister, Supachai Panitchpakdi, was nominated by his government to be the next head of the WTO beginning in 1999. He had a doctorate in economics; he had a lot of government experience, spoke great English, knew the trade field and was a very good candidate in their eyes. The other candidate was a former prime minister of New Zealand named Michael Moore who didn't even have a college education but had been a labor negotiator and was a real canny kind of operator. He held views about trade that were closer to America's views than Supachai, who was kind of leftist and kind of out there in terms of income re-distribution and that kind of thing. The U.S. didn't take a public position early, but on that's not how these things are done anyway. The way it works is that candidates start lobbying other countries as soon as they're declared. Most countries kind of hold off and wait until the race develops. Nevertheless, it became increasingly clear that the U.S. was not Supachai, and this was a huge disappointment to Thai leaders, who really felt that they had, for the first time, a very credible candidate and that we should be getting behind this candidate.

Again, Ambassador Hecklinger, knowing all the players in Washington, not only in the State Department, but USTR and Treasury, worked this issue very intensively. Even before Hecklinger got there, when Will Itoh was still the ambassador, we were trying to ascertain Washington views. I remember it all became clear in late January 1999, right before Ambassador Itoh left post. It was a few hours before the President's State of the Union address, the last week of January, in the morning in Bangkok, and we were having an official breakfast for something or other at the residence. The Ambassador got a phone call informing him that the Thai ambassador in Washington had just been told that the U.S. was going to be supporting Michael Moore. It was a huge kick in the gut, not only for the Thai but also for the embassy. We didn't have any advance warning of this. After Ambassador Hecklinger got to post the following week, this issue continued to play out. The eventual result was a compromise actually, the two candidates ended up splitting the term. Michael Moore took the first three years (1999-2002) and Supachai held office from 2002 to 2005. So the Thai got their senior official on the world stage but the way it came about left a very bitter residue in the bilateral relationship.

Q: It's always a problem isn't it when a country feels it's very close to the United States because we are always going to do something that will step on somebody's toes. Canada, as you know. Other countries can roll with the punch and say, "Americans, we don't owe them anything, but they don't owe us anything."

HUHTALA: I really think that the combination of those two events, the financial crisis and the WTO contest brought about sort of a loss of innocence on the part of the Thai, the Thai government. Whereas before they had always believed that we had a strong relationship, the kind of alliance and friendship that would carry us through no matter what, suddenly they began to see us as just another country that was not necessarily committed to bilateral friendship. I think this is probably something we're living with to this day.

Q: Did Thailand, I mean did you see a change in Thailand? You mentioned the WTO.

HUHTALA: Oh yes. First of all Thailand was pursuing greater involvement internationally. They were a member of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. We lobbied them a lot to join us in voting on various issues but they didn't always vote with us. I think increasingly they were beginning to see their position as kind of independent of the United States. They are one of the founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, and they were playing a leading role there. Again the relationship with Burma was a huge problem for them and a complex one. They were concerned about illegal workers, refugees, and drugs coming across the border and increasingly they were focusing on the problem of human trafficking, which had become a major issue for the United States as well. Many, many hill tribe and Burmese young women were trafficked into Thailand and sold into brothels. This was and is a huge problem.

Q: Bangkok, particularly Bangkok, but I guess elsewhere had become, Thailand had become sort of the sex capital which brought particularly fairly wealthy, people from Japan and I think of Germans and Japanese flooding the place.

HUHTALA: It's a complex issue. There were a lot of different things going on there. Many girls from poor families in the northeastern part of Thailand grow up believing that they owe their parents, they have to pay their parents back for having given birth to them. Young men can go out and get jobs, but what kind of job can a young girl go to? A lot of them would go voluntarily into a brothel for a few years, hoping to make a bunch of money, buy their parents a house, retire at 30, and maybe marry someone nice.

Q: There was a point of stigma wasn't there?

HUHTALA: That's what I'm trying to tell you. It was a cultural norm that wasn't the way we would do it, but this had been existing for many, many years. That kind of semi-voluntary prostitution is quite different from recruiters going to a village of uneducated hill tribe people, buying young girls and telling their parents they were going to Bangkok to be a waitress or something but then locking them in a brothel. The latter situation is condemned by Thais as well as by the United States. Thai people are very humane and they're hugely embarrassed when it turns out that things like that are happening. There were some activists who were pressing the government very hard on this issue. There were Thai NGOs pressing the government to do right by these girls and the government was working with them. In many ways they were taking a better approach to the trafficking issue than any other country in the region. They had shelters for women who had been rescued from brothels.

Senator Brownback of Kansas visited Thailand in early 2001, right after the new Trafficking in Persons Act that he sponsored had been enacted. I took him around to a lot of shelters and remote villages in the North and he saw the kind of steps the Thai government was beginning to take to rescue and rehabilitate these victims of trafficking. Now it was not perfect and there was still a huge problem there. Also a lot of Cambodians were being brought in to be professional beggars or to go into brothels. But because Thailand at least was honest enough to admit to the problem and was taking steps to punish the perpetrators and rehabilitate the victims they've never been on what we call Tier Three (which incurs sanctions) in the Trafficking in Persons report. They've always been on Tier Two because at least they are confronting it and trying to do their best.

Q: What about relations with Cambodia at that time?

HUHTALA: At that time relations were not as bad as they would get later. The Thais were engaged in trying to help Cambodia succeed. They had an embassy in Phnom Penh. They were concerned about smuggling along the border. I told you before that Ieng Sary and his Khmer Rouge remnant had taken control of a town on the western border of Cambodia. Well this spilled over directly into Thailand. Right before I got to Thailand Pol Pot had been found and had died. So there less of a concern about the Khmer Rouge but Thailand was worried about the lawlessness that was still attached to them. There was also controversy over a venerable old Buddhist temple that was along Cambodia's northern border but was only accessible from the Thai side. There was a lot of controversy back and forth about that. There was also a lot of smuggling of antiquities from Cambodia into Thailand. These were priceless Buddha's and things like that. Angkor Wat itself had been pillaged, and the problem continues to be to this day with a lot of Buddhist antiquities up in antique stores in Bangkok.

Q: How were Thai Chinese relations?

HUHTALA: They were very good actually. Thailand, of all the countries of Southeast Asia, has been most successful in integrating its Chinese minority. In fact in many ways it's the Sino-Thai elements of society that control the banking and the commercial sectors.

Q: I understand that the Chinese made a deliberate effort to improve things.

HUHTALA: No, this happened before. Because you remember up until the '80s China was supporting insurgencies in the area. It was not viewed as a friendly power during that period. But Chinese migrants to Thailand had been there for several hundred years. They intermarried extensively and they had taken Thai names. You have to be pretty good in Thai to figure out which ones are the ethnic, 100% Thai names and which names refer to people who have a lot of Chinese blood. One quick rule of thumb is if someone is a multimillionaire he's probably got Chinese blood!

Q: The more money the more likely ...

HUHTALA: Yes. They had done very well, that minority, and they'd been spared the kind of ethnic resentment, even conflict that you saw in other parts of Southeast Asia.

Q: Malaysia ...

HUHTALA: Exactly, and Indonesia. So when China revised its policies in the '80s and adopted a much more friendly approach towards all of Southeast Asia, Thailand was ready. There is a huge conglomerate company called CP Group (Charoen Pokphand) which was one of the first ones to invest massively in China. CP Group has a huge chicken industry and chicken feed and other agriculture kinds of things. They went into China big-time. By the time I was in Bangkok there were very large commercial interests on both sides of China and Thailand. China was beginning to send a lot of produce down the Mekong River, which of course flows out of China through Burma, Thailand and Laos and eventually into Vietnam, so there was trade even between China and northern Thailand. In fact, it was booming.

Q: Was there any problem while you were there, let's say the Mekong, over the Chinese using the water damming and that sort of thing?

HUHTALA: It was beginning to be a problem. There is something called the Mekong River Commission which had been in existence since the '60s and had gotten kind of moribund; it was being revived when I was there. There was a lot of interest in bringing all the countries of the Mekong watershed together - as I said that's about five or six countries - to discuss equitable sharing of the river and using the resources wisely. There also were efforts to build a road grid that would connect the whole region. Thailand has pretty good roads but they used to just kind of stop at their border. So the east-west road that stops at the Lao border is now being extended all the way through Laos to Vietnam, and the north-south road is being extended through Burma into China.

Q: Although they don't abut on each other, there's Laos in the way, but what about with Vietnam?

HUHTALA: The relationship was warming when I was there. The Thais had always feared Vietnam as an aggressive nation and had always regarded Cambodia as a buffer state, which is why when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in '79 it was a huge concern for Bangkok. By the time I got there Vietnam was engaged in its own economic development and its renovation program called "doi moi" and had reaching out in the spirit of friendship to the other countries in the region. Thailand was taking them up on it. Not without some misgivings of course but I think, again, Thai businessmen were beginning to invest in Vietnam and they saw a lot of potential there.

Q: How did we view ASEAN?

HUHTALA: By that time we were beginning to take ASEAN seriously. The organization had been formed in 1967, if I'm not mistaken, as an economic grouping, with only five countries at the time. Over the years it had slowly developed a more overtly political orientation. By the late '90s ASEAN represented about half a million people and huge combined GDP, even with some of the countries just beginning to develop. I remember the 30th anniversary of ASEAN's founding occurred while I was still in Washington. There was a big glittery reception downtown and our Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Tom Pickering, attended. It was sort of a coming out party for ASEAN in the eyes of the United States. The U.S. Secretary of State, has always attended the ASEAN ministerial meeting in the summer (until this past year, that is). In 2000 that meeting was in Bangkok, so Madeline Albright attended. However, if you remember it was at the end of July of that year when President Clinton and the leaders of Israel and Palestine were at Camp David trying to hammer out an agreement. Secretary Albright was involved in that too so she was a couple of days late to the ASEAN meeting. Her deputy, Strobe Talbot arrived for the first day and then she came for the second day.

Q: I think we initiated it, maybe we didn't, APEC or something like that?

HUHTALA: APEC was formed in 1992, '93, I guess.

Q: Asia, what?

HUHTALA: Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation. It was formed partly as a counter weight to Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir's proposal for an East Asia economic group that would exclude the United States and other countries. APEC is much broader than that. It includes all the countries of the Pacific rim on the Asian side and many in the western hemisphere including Canada, United States, Mexico, Peru, and Chile (others are welcome to join). Yes, we were a big proponent of APEC. I believe the first meeting was in Bangkok in the early '90s.

Q: This includes heads of state?

HUHTALA: There is the summit meeting every year but that's at the end of the year, usually in November. The summit is preceded by a whole year of meetings of the ministerial and sub-ministerial level.

Q: How did the Thais respond?

HUHTALA: They were pretty happy in APEC. In fact I remember going to the APEC meeting in Vancouver, that would have been November 1997, when the Chuan government had just come into power. I was in the room when Foreign Minister Surin came in to meet with Madeline Albright for the first time, and the vibes were very positive. This was a brand new, dynamic government with a lot of progressive political and economic goals. The two sides kind of bonded immediately.

Q: How did you find relations with your old bailiwicks, the desk and all this? Did you find that you and the ambassador and Department of State in Washington in pretty close accord?

HUHTALA: It was great in those years. First of all my previous deputy on the desk, Ravic Huso, had succeeded me as Director, and so he and I are "like lips and teeth." We had the same approach towards management and a strong friendship. The new Thai desk officer was also an extremely good officer, very responsive to the embassy.

Q: Who was that?

HUHTALA: His name was George Kent, and he was followed by Ben Moeling; both were excellent. The Deputy Assistant Secretary for Southeast Asia was my predecessor as DCM in Bangkok, Skip Boyce. So there were a lot of people there who knew the issues and whom we could talk to on a regular basis, and we did. It was a good cordial working relationship.

Q: Did we see Thailand playing a role in the military context?

HUHTALA: Yes. On several occasions Thailand had granted us access. This is something that's rather sensitive for the Thai, but when we had been sending military assets for instance from Guam or Japan to go to the Middle East to enforce the no-fly zones in Iraq they gave us access for refuelling basically on a phone call. They did that repeatedly. This is one reason why their disappointment in us later on would be so acute. They saw themselves as very steadfast allies, and indeed the military relationship has been rock solid. It's been terrific. Every year there is a huge military exercise in Thailand called Cobra Gold which has been the largest exercise we have anywhere in Asia. It's in May every year and we invite 19 or 20 countries to be observers. (We've invited them to participate but only Singapore has agreed to do so far.) We bring in huge numbers of American forces and exercise on the ground with our Thai allies.

Q: How was India viewed from Thailand because actually it's easy to forget that Thailand abuts on the Indian Ocean?

HUHTALA: Thailand was also involved in a couple of organizations that included countries of the Andaman Sea and India. They were very much reaching out in that direction as well. I would characterize that as a relationship that was budding. It was developing.

Q: Were the Indians seen as a potential problem, aggressors or a benign influence?

HUHTALA: I think they saw India as a potential partner, as a country that was developing very rapidly and they could offer some advantages to Thailand. Thailand has always tried to take the middle path. They want to be friendly with China and India, with the United States and with China. They want to balance relations, and this goes back for hundreds of years. That's one way they avoided being colonized by the European powers.

Q: What about cooperation with Malaysia?

HUHTALA: Thailand and Malaysia had agreed to joint development of an oil field in the Gulf of Thailand to which they both had claims. The idea was to construct a pipeline from the field that would run through southern Thailand and go down into Malaysia. Under Thailand's new reformist constitution any major infrastructure project like that was supposed to be subject to public hearings in Thailand, and they did so for the pipeline project. The only problem was they had the public hearing after they began work on the pipeline. So local fishermen in southern Thailand who didn't like the idea of the pipeline and thought it would really interfere in their fishing were furious and they had riots and demonstrations. It was a very, very tense time, and it came at the same time that a similar scenario was playing out in eastern Thailand over the building of a dam. Again the public hearings were held sort of after the fact and the people went ballistic. These were internal Thai problems that became sort of bumps on the road to a full democracy; they had an effect in terms on their relations with Malaysia because the pipeline was delayed for such a long time that Malaysia started talking about building its own pipeline, bypassing Thailand entirely. It took years for that to be worked out.

Q: Boat people were no longer around?

HUHTALA: Oh no, that was long finished under the Orderly Departure Program.

Q: Had there been any absorption of various refugees who ended up in Thailand?

HUHTALA: No, almost none. The only thing you can point to really is the Burmese, some of whom had come into Bangkok and were living more or less freely there. This was causing problems. They were resorting to some law breaking and engaging in political activities, protesting the Burmese junta. While I was there a very serious hostage situation occurred at the Burmese Embassy. An angry mob surrounded the embassy with embassy employees trapped inside and Thai police on the scene. The deputy foreign minister, a brave person named Sukhumbhand Paribatra, who was actually a prince of the royal blood, went in to negotiate a resolution to the crisis. What ended up taking place was that a couple of the key protestors plus the deputy foreign minister were flown in a helicopter to a Burmese refugee camp a couple of hundred miles away from Bangkok. Sukhumbhand was a very earnest and respectable minister, and I had my heart in my mouth when I saw him going off with those folks, but they did release him and that diffused that situation. At that point we stepped in to offer the Thais hostage negotiating training because the police had made some key errors, they didn't handle the crisis very professionally. For example, they let the terrorists get the upper hand several times. A few months later there was another hostage situation at a hospital in southern central Thailand and this time the police and the military had a joint operation that stormed the hospital, killed the bad guys, and didn't hurt a single patient so that was a more successful outcome.

Q: Were there any other sort of developments? First place, I can't remember where things stood with President Clinton?

HUHTALA: I can tell you. I arrived in Bangkok in August of '98 and at the end of that month the transcript of the Starr Report came out, available online. All of the nasty revelations about his affair with Monica Lewinsky and the blue dress and the cigar and all of that stuff came out. There is one thing that Thais love to do is joke, and so does the diplomatic corps, and as a newly arrived female DCM I found it a little bit embarrassing to have to sit at dinner tables where everyone was making cigar jokes!

Q: I have to point out for somebody who is looking at this not of the era, President Clinton was using a cigar, and I won't say inappropriate, but a different manner than one normally uses a cigar for with a young lady.

HUHTALA: What I found most shocking was that while this was going on he was talking on the phone to a senator. That's pretty insulting.

Q: What's new with you, oh nothing.

HUHTALA: But the Thais like many people around the world viewed this essentially as a comedy and hadn't really changed their fundamental estimation of President Clinton. And so as the impeachment process unfolded over the next year or so, they followed it, but I don't think that they were terribly concerned about it. In any case, they believed they would get a better relationship with Republicans because they still blamed Clinton for the financial crisis and the response there too. So many of them were happy when Al Gore did not win the 2000 election.

Q: If we think of anything beyond that.

HUHTALA: Well the other thing that happened near the end of my tenure there was that Thaksin Shinawatra became prime minister of Thailand. He was a really interesting politician. He'd been a police colonel, trained in the United States. In the early '90s he left the police force and became a businessman getting his start through some major satellite deals with the military junta that ruled Thailand after the 1991 coup. The origins of Thaksin's incredible wealth are a little bit shady. He went into politics in the mid '90s, and served briefly in one of the revolving door governments of that period as a government minister. The Ambassador and I called on him when he was building his new political party which is called Thais love Thais. His was a very populist sort of appeal. He won massively against the Democrats in the January 2001 election on a platform of three major elements: a debt moratorium for all farmers, a million baht grant (about \$23,000) for every village in Thailand and guaranteed health care at a cost of only 30 baht (75 cents) a visits. Any Thai could go into a public hospital and have anything done for 30 baht, whether it's a routine visit or an operation. These were breathtakingly expansive proposals for a country that was still pulling itself out of the financial crisis. He won overwhelmingly. He is still prime minister and he is one of the most controversial figures, I think, in Thai history.

Q: How did we see it at the time?

HUHTALA: I don't know how everybody saw it but I was disappointed to see the Democratic government which had been very earnest and was very serious about the democratic reforms it was advocating, get swamped by the economic realities and by their inability to bring the country around financially. To be honest I don't think any party could have brought the country around financially only two years after the crash. Nevertheless they were kind of inept in meeting the challenge that Thaksin presented, which represented a whole new approach to the Thais at a time when they were desperate for a new approach.

Q: Did we see the platform as viable?

HUHTALA: No, we didn't think it was. The odd thing is he has managed to deliver in some fashion on all of those promises. I don't know if the quality of the 75 cent medical care is any better than it was before but people are able to go in and get medical care. They have to wait a long time in over-crowded public hospitals but it's sort of working. The part about the million-baht fund for each village was a bit of a shell game; he made it sound like it was going to be a grant but in reality it was a loan. During the campaign people in these rural villages were sitting around saying, "Okay, a million baht, let's see, you'll get a 1,000, baht, he'll get 5,000," etc. They were dividing it up in advance, thinking it was going to be a huge handout, and instead it was a loan from the government that was repackaged from existing sources. The money would only be granted upon presentation of a proposal by the village elders showing how they would use it in an appropriate way to promote development, to build a well or a school, for instance. So it was nothing like it had been made out to be. The debt moratorium for farmers was only a two-year moratorium; at the end of two years they still had the same amount of debt plus interest. So that wasn't nearly the good deal that it sounded like. Nevertheless the voters bought it.

We in the U.S. government were concerned about the economic viability of these proposals. We viewed Thaksin, indeed we still do, as a populist demagogue in many ways. He has since undertaken some pretty questionable actions, for instance the campaign against the drug trade in 2002 that resulted in the extrajudicial killings of thousands of suspects by provincial and police authorities. It was sort of akin to the old Thomas Becket story, "Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?" Thaksin called in his provincial governors and made it clear they should eliminate drug dealers without establishing any guidelines.

Q: Were these killings designed to, who were they?

HUHTALA: What he said to his governors and provincial police officials was, I want to see a huge reduction in the number of drug dealers out there on the street and I'm putting the burden on you to make sure it happens.

Q: This is a former police officer.

HUHTALA: Exactly. You make sure they are not out there and don't tell me how you did it sort of thing. This was appalling, especially in a country that had tried so hard to promote a more democratic human rights-based government. He also clamped down drastically on freedom of the press, stacked various independent commissions with his cronies and continued to buy politicians right and left.

Q: Well anyway, did we see a change in his way of approaching the U.S. from the prior administration?

HUHTALA: Yes. Through his corporate connections he already was friendly with Bush family, especially with George H.W. Bush, so he very much tried to play on these personal ties. Nevertheless I think relations have been kind of troubled because of some of the excesses that he has allowed to go forward.

Q: What about, while you were there how did you view the role of corruption and Thai politics in society?

HUHTALA: Well corruption was known to be very extensive and it always had been. One of the fundamental measures laid out in the new constitution of 1997 was that politicians could not change parties within six months of an election. This was supposed to end the practice of politicians selling themselves to the highest bidder in a system that had ten or more parties. But Thaksin managed to get around that. He bought himself a party by just doing it at an earlier period; right up until the deadline members of parliament were flocking to join his party. Then once he came into office his Thai Rak Thai, or Thais love Thais party had a majority of seats in the parliament; he formed a big coalition with a few other parties and then eventually gobbled them up. They merged with Thai Rak Thai. The parliamentary opposition now is very tiny. I think he's got close to a four-fifths majority. Under the new constitution he has reached the point where he himself cannot be the subject of a censure motion, although individual ministers can. But with those kinds of numbers, it's kind of like the Republicans in today's Congress. He's kind of veto proof. When he came into office too there was a huge scandal about his financial disclosure forms which had not been accurate. He had huge assets, many homes, golf courses, that kind of things. He put many of his assets in the name of his minor children and his wife, and even his servants, and got away with that partly because he just sort of stared down the nascent judiciary in Thailand; there surely was money changing hands there too. It looked very suspicious when the Constitutional Court ruled on the matter and found that he was not guilty.

Q: What about American businesses and problem of corruption? Did you have to deal with that?

HUHTALA: Of course. We had a very active Chamber of Commerce. Corruption is always a concern. It came out particularly in large arm sales when U.S. companies were offering planes or tanks or other large items to the Thai military. Their competitors from France and Britain were obviously putting money under the table and it was very tough for us. I remember at one point Ambassador Hecklinger was just livid when the Thai Navy Commander went for a British or a French helicopter system, clearly not as good a deal as what we were offering overtly, clearly money going into his pocket. It was hard for him to even look the man in the eye again he was so furious. That's a problem. Also the U.S. and Thailand had a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation that went back a long way that gave our businesses certain advantages in the Thai market, like national treatment. That was due to expire in a couple of years unless the Thai government were to pass a law institutionalizing it. That was one of the things that we were working very hard on. In the end, I think it did lapse but perhaps under the WTO we found a way to preserve the advantage for our businessmen. I think what has happened now is that other businessmen have the same advantage.

Q: What was the role of the royal family?

HUHTALA: Good question. The present King of Thailand is perhaps the most revered monarch they've ever had. He had passed his 50th anniversary on the throne right before I got there; a beloved monarch, known for taking good care of the people. He stayed out of politics most of the time until things got really bad, for instance after the military coup of '91. When he needs to do it he intervenes and he has great moral suasion when he does that. By the time I was there he was in his late 70s, living in a palace in southern Thailand (Hua Hin) for most of the time. His wife Queen Sirikit quite openly was no longer living with him; she spent much of her time in Chiang Mai. The real concern was his son (there were had three royal daughters and one son). This is a system where the crown passes to the male and the Crown Prince is a disaster, a very abusive personality. He divorced his first wife and then took up with an actress and had a bunch of kids by her and finally married her, and then she ran away with a chief marshal of the Air Force and he disinherited all the kids except for his daughter whom he brought back to Thailand. He has two daughters by these two different wives. Now he is married again. The problem is there is no son to follow him and he is seen as a completely unworthy successor to his father. His sister, the one princess who never married, is seen as very like her father. She also is devoted to the people and has a lot of charitable activities and is a teacher. In the late '70s she was elevated to a rank that is sometimes translated as crown princess, but it's not quite the same. It would make her technically eligible to succeed but only if he didn't contest it and everyone thinks that he would. While a lot of Thai people would prefer to see her ascend to the throne, it's not going to happen. Thaksin, by the way, has done a lot to ingratiate himself with the Crown Prince. He's given him money and has worked his way into his good favour.

Q: By the way did CNN, was Thailand pretty well wired into the world information thing as far as CNN?

HUHTALA: Oh yes, they used to have a Bangkok bureau chief. They don't have one there anymore but they get stringers and report from there frequently.

Q: Then you left there in 2001, and then where?

HUHTALA: That's when I went as Ambassador to Malaysia.

Q: Should we finish off here?

HUHTALA: Yeah, let's finish off here.

Q: We'll pick this up the next time in 2001 and how you got Malaysia and all that.

Q: Today is the 30th of November 2005. Marie, 2001, how did you get Malaysia?

HUHTALA: How did I get Malaysia?

Q: I mean this is, for one thing Malaysia is one of those places that has been off and on the White House list as a place where sometimes they put.

HUHTALA: Very rarely actually, there have been very few political appointees there.

Q: More in Singapore?

HUHTALA: Singapore almost always. My name was put on a list by my home bureau, EAP, in the summer of 2000 but I really didn't expect to get the nomination. In fact it was kind of cute, when I was asked if I would be interested, I said, "Let me talk to my husband" who was not in Bangkok at the time. Called him up that night and he was certainly willing to support it. Then I went back to the Bureau and said, "Yes, I'm very interested." They said, "Fine, we'll put you on the list." I said, "Well, what does one do to advance one's candidacy?" The answer was nothing, it was poor form to do anything but just sit back and "enjoy the process." I took that as a sign that I'd been put on the list but I wouldn't necessarily get the call. Then that September I was back in Washington on R & R or something, and I was floored when I got a phone call from Skip Boyce, the Deputy Assistant Secretary, telling me that the D Committee in State had selected me and my name would be going over to the White House. It then took many, many months for a decision because this was right before the contested presidential election of 2000 and there was a delay before the transition team for the new Bush Administration even went to the White House. The wheels ground very, very slowly and I didn't get the paperwork to fill out until the following April. Up until that point I thought the post might go to a friend of the President or a political appointee of some sort. So it was kind of a thrill when it all came together.

Q: How did your hearing go or preparations?

HUHTALA: This was funny. I had made plans to finish my tour in Bangkok and leave the last week of July, 2001. My airline reservation to depart post was for Thursday the 26th. I knew that there would be an August recess in the Congress and I would have that time to start getting ready for the hearings and get myself completely briefed up on our relations with Malaysia, because up until then I'd been pretty much focused on Thailand. I thought I would have a confirmation hearing in September.

Well on Monday night, July 23rd, we got home from a farewell dinner to find messages all over the house, telling me to call Washington. I called right away and found out the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was scheduling a hearing for EAP nominees on Wednesday July 25 and they wanted me to come back in time for that. I said, "But I'm in Bangkok." Yes, they knew that. I said, "I don't even know if I can get a flight. My goodness, it takes 24 hours to get there. If I leave tomorrow morning I would just make it in time." They said, "Yes, that's what we want you to do." Because I was expressing these doubts they got the impression in Washington that I was unwilling to come back and unwilling to cooperate. The Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs called me and we had a very unpleasant conversation. He was a former Marine officer and not very sympathetic. I said, "I will try, I will try."

For the next hour I tried to get through to somebody in the embassy to arrange a flight out, but it was just a string of errors. I couldn't reach the GSO in charge of travel, as somebody was using the Internet on his phone line. Finally I got in touch with the Administrative Counsellor, who in turn had to call in someone from the American Express office. Meanwhile in Washington, the word went out that the nominee for Malaysia was being "uncooperative." The next phone call I got was from the PDAS in EAP (Christopher La Fleur) saying, "Marie, Rich Armitage [the Deputy Secretary] is trying to call me about you and before I return his call I'd like to hear your side of the story." So I explained what was going on. But sometime after midnight it became clear that my husband and I were going to get seats on the morning flight home; I still don't know how they did that because normally the flights are all over-booked in summer.

I stayed up all that night, drafting my confirmation statement and sending it back to the Malaysia desk (thank goodness I had a State Department Open Net terminal at my residence), making other arrangements, and packing my bags. Fortunately we had already packed out and I had tickets for the 26th in hand. So in the end we were able to leave the following morning, flew for 24 hours, and got into Washington, where I found a three-inch thick briefing book waiting for me at the hotel. I remember I fell asleep trying to read it. The next morning I had my hearing.

Q: Did they ask any questions?

HUHTALA: Of course they did. John Kerry was the Senator presiding. I went up with three other nominees, for posts in South Korea, Singapore and Australia. Senator Kerry spent 15 minutes on each of us, grilling us about U.S. relations with that country. There were representatives from the Malaysian embassy in the room too. Then after he'd grilled all four of us he went back and he said, "Now I've got some general questions. Are any of you doing or do you have any thoughts on how to confront transnational issues? Fortunately that's one thing we did an awful lot of in Thailand, on things such as counter narcotics, AIDS, and trafficking in persons. So while the other three nominees were sort of scratching their heads I jumped in with the first response on that question; then they of course had things to say about it too. It was a very in-depth hearing. I can only figure that I was able to survive it because I had been reading all of the cable traffic about Malaysia for the previous year. I had only the briefest consultations with the Desk, literally a half hour that morning, during which I received their assurance that our policy towards Malaysia was basically trouble-free except for the controversy over Anwar Ibrahim. So I was able to just go on that. It was a wing and a prayer. It was amazing.

Q: In a way it was probably a hell of a lot better than spending months polishing up on everything you had to do.

HUHTALA: True. That's quite true. Still it was just a little bit more pressure than I had hoped for!

Q: I remember, I've only sat in on one hearing. I just thought I'd go and listen to a hearing and somebody was up to go to Thailand and one senator said, "That's the place where the white elephants come from isn't it?" Yes senator and that was it.

HUHTALA: That was it? Wow, well not with John Kerry.

Q: This was way back.

HUHTALA: Of course Senator Kerry had a lot of experience in Asia and particularly Southeast Asia, not just Vietnam. I've mentioned him before in this interview. And of course I had met him before. He had really good questions for us all. There was nothing pro-forma about that hearing.

Q: First place, you were in Malaysia from when to when?

HUHTALA: As it turned out I arrived on September 30, 2001. My swearing in had been scheduled for September 11, of all days. Of course it didn't happen that day as we all know. My whole term in office was really sort of under the shadow of what happened on the awful day and the threat of terrorism. I served in Malaysia from September 30, 2001 to the very end of May, 2004.

Q: As you prepared to go out there how did we see our relations? What were you going to be carrying in your portfolio, your attaché case?

HUHTALA: There was this large outstanding issue of the treatment by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad of his Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who had mounted a political challenge to him, only to be arrested and put on trial for sodomy and corruption. There were two separate trials, both widely viewed as rigged; it was a real perversion of justice in Malaysia, which was unfortunate because as a former British colony it had inherited a very good court system and pretty good human rights situation. So this was a huge issue, especially after the U.S. referred to Anwar as a prisoner of conscience, or political prisoner, in our annual human rights report. This caused a lot of friction in the relationship.

That issue aside, relations were pretty good. We had very large U.S. investment there, a lot of American companies doing business. It was a rapidly developing state, one of the best economies in the whole region. Before the 9/11 attacks, I really thought that the bulk of my duties there were going to center around protecting American businesses and promoting trade and getting better access to Malaysian markets. Of course that changed dramatically on September 11. In fact, the events of September 11 brought about a temporary rapprochement between the Mahathir government and the United States. The prime minister actually came to the embassy, before my arrival, to sign the condolence book and have tea with the chargé d'affaires. This was quite a gesture coming from a man who had been a scathing critic of the United States over the years. He condemned the 9/11 attacks and promised to cooperate with us on fighting terrorism, which was all to the good. As a result President Bush called him to thank him for his support and then they met at an APEC meeting in Shanghai in October of that year. Relations were warming as we began to cooperate together on counter terrorism. And for the bulk of my term Malaysia was a good partner in fighting terrorism.

Q: When you went to Malaysia what sort of an embassy was it? What was there?

HUHTALA: It's considered a medium-size embassy. There were about 80 or 90 Americans, six to eight agencies I think, and another 120 local staff. Although Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country, the local employees at the embassy are overwhelmingly Chinese Malaysians. In Malaysia as a whole the Chinese represent about 25% of the population, Malays about 60%, Indians about 10% and the rest are native peoples and expats. According to the Malaysian constitution, all Malays are Muslim by definition, and they enjoy considerable advantages under a system of reverse discrimination favoring the majority Malays. Everything in Malaysia is based on race; political parties, companies, schools, all are segregated along racial lines. As a result, well-educated Chinese have a very hard time getting jobs in the government or civil service, which meant we were able to draw on a pool of excellent applicants to work for us in the embassy. Our professional staff were largely Chinese. Our drivers, guards, etc. were largely Indians. We had to work hard to get a few Malays into key positions. One of the best recent hires that we had was a young Malay college graduate that we put to work in the public affairs section, who took some grief from his friends for working for the Americans actually. He gave us a wonderful window into what was happening in Malay society he created a Malaysian language version of the embassy website and that kind of thing. We also had an outstanding Indian Malaysian working in the political section; he had been a key aide to one of the major Indian politicians for a number of years so he knew everybody in parliament. He really knew the lay of the land in terms of the political situation. But primarily our local staff were Chinese.

Q: Who is your DCM?

HUHTALA: When I got there my DCM was Bob Reis; a year later he departed and Bob Pollard took over as DCM.

Q: How did you work with your DCM having just been a DCM in a very large embassy? How did you find turning this over to somebody else?

HUHTALA: It took me a little bit of time. I think I recognized early on that just as I had no longer been able to be a political officer when I was in Bangkok, I couldn't be a DCM while I was in Kuala Lumpur. I made a conscious effort to delegate as much of the management as possible to him. Of course the first DCM had been there a couple of years already and so he knew the ropes and all I really had to do was just stay out of his way. When the new DCM came it was his first job as a DCM and I found that I needed to give him a little bit of guidance on how to be an effective manager. Not that he was unable to do it, I just had a wealth of experience to share. I appreciated having a DCM in place to do all of those things that I'd been doing in Bangkok because my tasks were very different as Ambassador. I did a whole lot more of what I loosely call representation, in other words, demarches to make, speeches to give, travel around the country, entertaining, being entertained, receiving visitors, briefing delegations, giving interviews to the press. I was very grateful that I didn't have to also make sure that the Mission Program Plan was put together correctly or write a dozen EER's (employee evaluation reports) for senior officers of the embassy. I was quite happy to hand over the reins.

Q: Let's talk a bit about the job of ambassador. How did you see it, you watched Will Itoh was it,

HUHTALA: And Dick Hecklinger.

Q: In Malaysia what was sort of the major thing you were doing?

HUHTALA: As I say our whole mission had been transformed by the new war on terrorism so the primary thing I was doing was trying to win the support of the Malaysian government and people for what we saw as a global war on terrorism. This was not easy in a majority Muslim country where the first burst of sympathy for the United States quickly died in the face of our invasion of Afghanistan, which began one week after I arrived in the country. There were a lot of negative press articles and bad feelings about the women and children and other civilians who were caught in the crossfire during that conflict in Afghanistan. And that was nothing compared to the ill will that arose later on as we began the march towards invading Iraq. The Prime Minister himself was whipping up anti-American emotions on a daily basis, accusing the United States of wanting to colonize the world, keeping third world countries down, exploiting their economies. He accused us of being anti-Muslim and accused us of supporting Israel to the point where we had lost all credibility in the Muslim world. It's kind of hard to fight against this kind of constant rhetoric.

I mentioned that we had arranged a meeting for President Bush and Prime Minister Mohammed in Shanghai in October 2002. We went further than that, because Malaysia was cooperating with us on counter terrorism, efforts like freezing terrorist assets, so he received an invitation to meet with President Bush in the Oval Office in May 2002. This was the first time in quite a few years that this cantankerous prime minister had been invited to Washington. He even got to stay in Blair House, meet with Congressional leaders and was honored at a dinner hosted by American business leaders. It was to be a very important visit. However, the night before I was to depart on that visit (I would meet the Malaysian delegation in Washington), Mahathir addressed a crowd of supporters at a political rally up country, in the Malaysian language, and said something dreadful about Israel. It was one of his customary rants; the man was a terrible anti-Semite and routinely accused the Israelis of being terrorists. This was picked up by FBIS, and Washington leaders got wind of it within eight hours. Condoleezza Rice who was the National Security Advisor at the time, was prepared to call off the whole visit because of that. We really had to scramble to save the visit. It involved getting back to the prime minister (who was surprised that we were monitoring something he said in Malaysia, in a remote state) and get him to "clarify" the intent of what he was saying. It was a close call. He almost blew the whole visit.

In retrospect, of course, I think we should have gone with our original instincts. Mahathir made a speech to the Organization of Islamic Conference in October 2003, right before he left office, which offended the entire West, stating that Jews rule the world and the mission of all good Muslims is to fight the Jews. It demonstrated the deep-seated hatred he had always held for the Jewish people. Indeed, there have never been diplomatic relations between Israel and Malaysia, and the small Jewish community that once lived in colonial Malaya has relocated to Singapore.

Q: Where did you see, I'm going to come back to the role of the ambassador but, while we are on this, where did you see, how do you call him, Prime Minister Mohammed ?

HUHTALA: Mr. Prime Minister, usually. Sometimes I would follow Malaysian custom and use his honorific title, at the time it was "Dato Seri." (He was later granted a higher title, "Tun.") The Malaysians have titles similar to British knighthoods bestowed by their King and Sultans; as there are nine royal families (who take turns occupying the national throne), there's a huge proliferation of titles.

Q: Where was he coming from? Was he a demigod, was this a deep belief?

HUHTALA: He had been in office for over 20 years at that point. He finally retired while I was there so I saw the changing of the guard. Where was he coming from? He was very strongly nationalistic and very anti-American. Ten years earlier, in the early '90s, he had tried to rally the other countries of Asia to form an East Asian economic caucus as a bloc that would exclude the United States. We countered with the proposal of putting together APEC, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum, which includes as many countries of the Pacific rim as wish to apply. Even then, even ten years earlier, he had been a thorn in our side.

I did a lot of thinking and reading about Mahathir, and of course I met him on many occasions. I think a lot of his orientation came from the colonial experience. He grew up and came to adulthood during the last years of British rule. Although he is a well educated man (he's a medical doctor), he did not get his education in United Kingdom like so many of the Malaysian upper class. Instead he was educated in Singapore. He came from a poor family, and he's also part Indian. There were thus a lot reasons to make him feel insecure and resentful.

Then he was made very angry by the reaction that he inspired when he sacked his deputy prime minister and put him in jail on those scurrilous charges, using a series of court cases that were really rigged. For instance, in one of these trials, the deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, was being accused of having had homosexual relations with an individual. (Homosexuality, or "sodomy," is illegal in Malaysia.) Because this was a court case they had to specify the date and the place of the alleged encounter, and they named a date and a building in which it supposedly took place. When the defense countered that that building had not yet been built on that date, the judge let the prosecutors amend the charges, just like that. It was just so blatantly rigged, it became a true embarrassment. What had really happened was that the deputy prime minister had challenged the prime minister politically, calling on him to step down, and this was the reaction. Mahathir's decision was to just squash him. And when Anwar was put into jail he was beaten very badly by the chief of police with his hands shackled behind his back. He was beaten so badly that he had permanent damage to his back, to his spine.

This drew international condemnation, especially because Anwar had been well known in capitals around the world, including Washington. I had to walk the line between making sure people did not think that we were supporting Anwar's political platform which we were not but taking serious exception to the way he had been treated. Mahathir interpreted this as outright political support for Anwar and his political of reform, or "Reformasi." We did not take a position on the internal politics of Malaysia but we have always condemned this huge violation of human rights.

Q: Could you get a dialog on the human rights?

HUHTALA: It was very tough. Every year when the human rights report came out of Washington I would be called into the foreign ministry to receive a protest. The first year this happened, the director general who had called me in said, "This report is full of inaccuracies." I said, "Fine, please clarify. Here's the report, please give us all the information you can and if there are inaccuracies we'll get it cleared up." They did that, actually. The second year we were able to clean it up greatly because there were in fact, misstatements in it. You know, our human rights reports are based on a lot of NGO reports as well as embassy reporting, and mistakes happen. So we were able to clean up a lot of the inaccuracies. But of course we never made the Malaysians happy because we retained the central points, including criticism of Anwar's treatment and the government's affirmative action policies towards the majority Malay Muslims, or "Bumiputras,"

Q: Did you ever have one and one with the prime minister?

HUHTALA: No, never just the two of us in a room. I did get in to see him fairly regularly, for example, when there were visitors from Washington. The U.S. Trade Representative, Robert Zoellick, came for a visit the first month I was there, so I met Mahathir early on. He invited me to a state dinner that he was giving for the Lao prime minister and we had a chance to talk then. In the first flush of our cooperation after 9/11 there was a big meeting of the American Chamber of Commerce over lunch. Mahathir addressed the meeting, promising protection for U.S., investors, took questions for a long time, and then we all posed for pictures afterwards. Throughout my term I had numerous occasions to see the man and kind of take his measure. The whole society, the whole political class, was horribly sycophantic towards him. He seemed to be the only one who was expressing any original opinions; everybody else in that country, especially the Malays, were simply echoing whatever Mahathir had to say. It was kind of frustrating to chip through that.

Q: On the Muslim side, how Muslim was he and the country and did this reflect on the role of women on your ability to work at all?

HUHTALA: First let me talk about religion there. The ruling party, called UMNO (United Malay National Organization,) had been in power since independence in 1957, so it had a very firm grip on the body politic. There was a lot of corruption in the party and a lot of crony relationships as well. The opposition party was called PAS (a Malay acronym) had become a party of conservative, religious Islamists. They were not the Taliban, not anything like that, but they were using religion as a political tool. Before 9/11 in an attempt to disarm the opposition Mahathir had declared that Malaysia was an Islamic state because the majority of its people, around 60%, were Muslim. The opposition party, on the other hand, wanted a true Islamic state run by Sharia law. Mahathir's rather sophist failed to take the wind out of the opposition's sails, but from that point on there was a real effort by both parties to demonstrate that they were the better Muslims. Both sides were vying to be seen as more correct or closer to a true understanding of what it is to be Muslim. At the same time, the country as a whole had been moving in the direction of much more religious observation and expression than in the past. I remember that 20 or 30 years prior to this you rarely saw the women in Malaysia wear headscarves, for instance, and you rarely saw outward displays of religion. Now both were quite evident. I believe this is part of changes that occurred throughout the Muslim world after the Iranian revolution of 1979, which led to greatly enhanced consciousness of Islamic thought and practice. In the case of Malaysia, a secular multi-ethnic state was becoming increasingly Islamic, to the growing alarm of Chinese and Indian Malaysians.

Q: Were they Sunnis or Shiites?

HUHTALA: They were Sunni Muslims. Shiite practice was not tolerated in Malaysia. By the time I there were a lot of women wearing headscarves, not all, but a lot of them were doing so. Many more who were not wearing the headscarf were wearing the traditional Malay dress which is long, billowy and loose, down to the ground. They made these dresses and headscarves out of beautiful fabrics (much more colorful than those worn in the Middle East), but it was a very traditional kind of clothing. As a woman ambassador. I was careful to wear long sleeves and to keep my skirts below my knee, though of course I always wore western dress and never donned a headscarf.

The interesting thing was that despite the outward dress, women in Malaysia were actually quite liberated. The Attorney General and the Solicitor General were both women. There were several very powerful cabinet members who were women and Supreme Court judges, and prominent women in government and business. I realized that the Islamic dress in Malaysia enabled women to go out into the market place and into government and have professional careers without somehow signalling that they were loose women or anything like that. That took me a couple of years to figure out.

I myself never had any problem being a woman ambassador in this Muslim society. It absolutely was not an issue. In fact I think being a woman made it a little bit easier to do my job. Before I left Bangkok I had lunch with a Thai diplomat, a woman, who had been ambassador to Malaysia up until quite recently. I asked her what it was like to be a female ambassador in that country. She said, "Well, if you have any kind of an agenda you want to pursue it's an advantage because you will get more attention." Of course after 9/11 I had a huge agenda, and I used it to great effect I think. I was able to get lots and lots of press interviews, speeches, TV appearances; I gave a press conference the day I arrived in the country and the attention never let up. People ask me this often, "Was it difficult to be a woman in that situation?" My answer is no.

Q: I'm surprised that there wasn't a problem with the Muslim community about attacking Afghanistan because I would have thought the Taliban was such an awful ogre or not? Maybe they weren't.

HUHTALA: No, they were not unhappy to see the Taliban fall, but their press focused relentlessly on the plight of civilian casualties, what we called collateral damage. The Taliban would take a school and camouflage it and our forces wouldn't realize it was a school, we'd think it was a military target, so we'd hit it, and children would die. Pictures of dead babies in gruesome color would be on the front page of the newspaper. Malaysians are very emotional. Their emotions were being whipped up and they were really responding. We had a big demonstration outside the embassy about ten days into the Afghanistan event. Police came out with water cannons and got rid of them and that's the last big demonstration we had for a long time, but we knew the feelings were there.

Q: How about, going back to the role of the ambassador you say you did a lot of public appearances. How did this work there and how effective was this?

HUHTALA: I always got a lot of press when I gave a speech or I went out some place. I travelled to virtually all 13 of the states of Malaysia, I just missed one. Every time I'd go we would have the trip carefully planned so that it would include the following elements. First there would be a call on the Chief Minister or Menteri Besar, an elected official who was the equivalent to our state governors and who represented the governing coalition. I would also call on the Sultan of the state if there was one. Nine of the 13 states had hereditary royal families; in the other four states a royal governor would be appointed by the King for this largely ceremonial post. Malaysia has nine royal families, and the national throne rotates among them for five-year intervals, so many of the Sultans I called on had already been King; many others would get their turn eventually. So I would start by calling on the chief executive and the ruler of the state. Usually there was also a state economic development council that I would meet with to receive a briefing.

Then I made a special point of visiting American companies in the area. In almost every state there were a lot of them. I would hold some kind of press conference everywhere I went and I'd usually get a chance to visit some of the tourist attractions and markets. I also cut the ribbon on several "American Corners" being set up in regional libraries. These travels were very effective in projecting a positive view of America in the hinterland. It turned out that my predecessors had not been doing that. When I went out to the beautiful state of Sabah, which is on the island of Borneo, they really made a big deal about my visit because they hadn't seen an American ambassador there in over ten years. That was a very effective way to kind of get the word out and to explain our policies and to put a human face on what America was doing around the world. As is typically the case, I encountered a lot less opposition to what we were doing out in the provinces than I did in the capital.

Q: Do you feel a lot of that came from you might say the personal prejudice of the prime minister?

HUHTALA: Yes.

Q: And everybody was following his.

HUHTALA: Everybody was following his line very sycophantically. But I have to say also that there was a sort of deep-seated unease with what the United States was doing. It grew worse as my tour went on and was related to American efforts to crack down on terrorism and invade Iraq. This reaction went beyond what the prime minister had to say.

Q: What about the media there?

HUHTALA: It was tightly controlled by the government. The newspapers and the television stations all had to renew their licenses on a yearly basis. If they crossed the line and didn't support what the government was doing they would not have their licenses renewed. This had happened in the past. There was however, one Internet-based news organ called Malaysiakini. Its servers were mostly located in the United States so it was able to operate pretty freely and was frequently critical of the government. For Mahathir this was a dilemma because he wanted to promote the country as a continuing site for high-tech investment, which had been coming into the country increasingly. A lot of the most advanced IT companies in the world have set up manufacturing operations in Malaysia, including American companies like Motorola, Agilent, Hewlett Packard, Dell, Intel, and many others. He didn't want to shut off this image of Malaysia as a natural place for the Internet, e-marketing, even film editing. At the same time he took a lot of issue with what Malaysiakini was saying. At one point the police raided their offices and carted away their local servers briefly. I gave Malaysiakini a lot of interviews, as you might imagine.

Q: How did this ethnic balance go 30% Chinese? Were they the people who did the business and commerce?

HUHTALA: Largely. The way the system was set up there, any public corporation had to have a certain number of Malay directors in order to be listed on the stock exchange. So you would see these token Malays on the company masthead though the rest of the company was Chinese Malaysians. A lot of the real intellectual work was done by the Chinese. I think, despite all the protestations of racial harmony, that there were a lot of racial tensions in Malaysia. They had experienced dreadful race riots in '69 I think it was. After that they put the policy of preferment for the Malays in place. What this did is it really marginalized a lot of their best talent, the Chinese. For instance, many bright Chinese kids who were straight A students couldn't get into the national universities because places were reserved for the Malays. The Chinese had to go overseas for their university studies.

Q: I was wondering whether the Chinese influence there I would think there would be or maybe there couldn't be, but seepage towards Singapore or towards the United States or towards China, I don't know.

HUHTALA: Singapore of course was carved out of Malaysia in 1963 and it was sort of like a mirror image of Malaysia, a primarily Chinese society with very few Malays. The Chinese Malaysians often had relatives in Singapore, and many of them emigrated as well. There was a lot of rivalry between the two countries, too, and often sounded like sibling rivalry. And there seemed to be a brain drain going on among the Chinese; a lot of them had family in the United States or in Britain or other places, and young people who went overseas to study often remained there. At the same time Malaysia's trade with China, the emerging giant, was very important to them and the Chinese Malaysians had a natural lead in that direction. Many Malaysian Chinese, whose native language was Cantonese or Hakka, were learning Mandarin at that time. The Chinese were very successful in the business sector, but much less so in government, where they were largely frozen out, and I observed a fair amount of tensions between Chinese and Malays.

Also the young people, those who are now in their '20s and '30s are not inter-marrying with Malays, though many of the older generation had entered into mixed marriages. This seemed to me to be another indicator of ethnic balkanization. Part of this was due to the fact that the Malays had tightened up the religious laws so that today if a Muslim Malaysian marries a non-Muslim, the non-Muslim (man or woman) must convert to Islam. That wasn't true in the past. That naturally has discouraged a lot of mixed marriages. Also according to the Malaysian constitution, every Malay is a Muslim. If a Malay wants to change his religion he is considered apostate and forced to go to re-education camp. Thus it is extraordinarily difficult for them to change their religion. When we pointed that out in the context of our Religious Freedom Report, the Malaysian government got very upset. Malaysia has long trumpeted the fact that they allow every religion (except Judaism, of course) to be practiced freely, and for that reason they think they have religious freedom. But if you can't change your religion, that is not religious freedom at all.

Q: We are moving into an era of worldwide technical ability, people who are adept at dealing with the new world of communication and electronics and all that. So many people have gone to India and to China and Japan and all, I would think that by sticking one to the Muslim religion is an inhibitor. Putting Malays in preference to the Chinese that in the long run this is going to work to the detriment of Malaysia as far as moving ahead.

HUHTALA: Yes, I think that case can certainly be made but they didn't see it that way while I was there. The preferment of Malays was seen as a way to avoid a recurrence of the kind of ethnic strife that they had had in '69, where several thousand people were murdered in one day and it was truly dreadful. It was interpreted to have occurred because Malays felt economically disadvantaged compared to the Chinese. Now you can say there were probably reasons for that, as Chinese traditionally work very hard, and Malays often don't.

Q: No, but as I say, one can look at this and understand it but it does appear that Malaysia may find itself falling behind compared to say, Singapore. No matter how you slice it the Chinese hard work, drive for education and all is a tremendous asset.

HUHTALA: Of course it is. No, I've been talking mostly about the Mahathir era because I was there for the last years of that. It may be changing now that he has moved on.

Q: How did you find our information service in our building public diplomacy work in the country? You could have interviews, you got to get stuff, but if the press was sub-servant to the prime minister and he's unhappy with this I would think.

HUHTALA: It was very frustrating. I'll give you two examples. One was when I was making a visit to Sabah state in Borneo, I was giving a press conference at the end of a whole day of meetings and the local television station's video camera was on. While I was answering questions like, "How did you like our state? Don't you think it's safe here? Isn't it beautiful?" the camera's little red light remained on. But when the question of Iraq came up and I started to explain our concern about possible weapons of mass destruction there, the light on the camera went out. They didn't even waste any videotape on it because they knew were not going to run that part of the interview.

Then on a different occasion I had a TV interview taped in my office. I thought the interview went very well. I was able to explain our policy, what we were doing, why we were doing it. I was able to lay it all out. Then afterwards they asked me to sit at my desk for some atmosphere shots, so I did that, and then the reporter and I were chatted for a few minutes with the sound turned off but the camera still running. That evening when I turned on the news, I saw about ten seconds of me talking and trying to explain what was going on, followed by the atmosphere shots with a voice over-saying something like, "Although the Ambassador says that America is doing this for the right reasons, in fact they are aggressively targeting Iraq to get access to oil." I was furious. So I told my press officer that from then on I would do no more taped interviews. I still wanted to get our message out, so the solution was to drive way outside of town and make a live appearance on the evening news show. That way everything I had to say was carried live. It was so hard to present our case for going after those WMDs (which I, like most officials, did believe existed in Iraq before the invasion). Those were the lengths I had to go to live TV, interviews with Malaysiakini, and of course speeches, where the people in the room would hear what I had to say but it wouldn't get any farther than that.

Q: Did you get any feel for reaching to students, and where were the students on the issue ?

HUHTALA: Oh, this was frustrating too. We tried repeatedly to get me opportunities to speak to students. I had a good Public Affairs Section and they were delighted that their Ambassador was so involved in outreach. They were very activist. Finally I had an invitation to speak to the students at the University of Malaysia, in April of 2003. After the U.S. invaded Iraq in March, the trustees or the administration withdrew the invitation. They said they were sure that their students would not want to be "confused" by hearing from the American Ambassador. Oh man, I was furious, I couldn't believe that. What about academic freedom? University students in Malaysia are not exactly independent thinkers. They pretty much follow the line they're supposed to be following. About six months later I got an opportunity to speak at a different university, but that was to graduate students and it was an international crowd. Again, I got very hostile questions but that was fine with me. I didn't mind taking hostile questions because I had learned in that context to let them vent their emotions and then reply logically to the points that they made. I usually scored some points, and I did it respectfully. Whether I changed minds, it's harder to tell.

Q: Did you see a line between the Malays and the Chinese and how they approached things or were they different?

HUHTALA: Well, you know it's interesting. I never got into a lot of political discussions with the Chinese. I think they just kept their heads down. The Indians, however, were quite vocal, and remember they were only 10% of the population.

Q: But they talk for 15 minutes.

HUHTALA: No, it's not that. They fell into very a interesting demographic niche. They were disproportionately represented at the bottom levels and at the top levels of the income distribution. The vast majority of guards and drivers are Indians and janitors and that sort of thing, and a huge number of lawyers and doctors are Indians as well. There was nothing really in between, for example in the government. Some of these Indian intellectuals, while basically very pro-American, much more so than the Malays, nevertheless would rake me over the coals at some of my appearances because they too were very distressed by the direction they perceived American policy was going. It's no secret that our image around the world was very negative at that point.

Q: This raises a question and I'll let you play with it however you want. I've been doing these oral histories for 20 years and there have been various administrations in the United States and foreign policy and I found a good solid split but I've never seen almost unanimity of the retirees with the thrust certainly of the first four years of the Bush administration when you were doing this. Not only the going into Iraq because it is felt this is going to be more difficult than one might think and did it make sense. Afghanistan, no doubt about that, that was well justified. But also there seems to be a tendency to do things unilaterally and all. Are you, as the ambassador, and obviously you're going to say what the administration, I mean that's what you are paid for. At the same time did you find yourself either having your own doubts or concerns about keeping your troops in line?

HUHTALA: There was sort of a gradual evolution of the policy and people's feelings about it within the embassy and outside. In the first days and months after 9/11 I think there was a pretty united front. I think we all felt that toppling the Taliban was a very good thing. Even in Malaysia where they were moaning about the collateral damage. When those images got on TV of men and women liberated from the shackles of the Taliban and dancing in the streets, criticism of our invasion stopped right away. It just stopped. That was not so difficult really to talk about.

But then as 2003 advanced and it became increasingly clear that we were moving towards war in Iraq I began to get into some really tight spots because it was hard to justify. There was one very elite conference held on the resort island of Pangkor Laut in September of 2003. I was invited to be on the first panel, which was supposed to be about change. This was a conference about peace on earth, literally. Prime Minister Mahathir was there, most of the cabinet was there, and a lot of Malaysian intellectuals.

On my panel was Steve Forbes, the former presidential candidate and right-wing Republican. He got up for his turn to speak and instead of talking about the assigned topic he said, "I just want to tell you that the U.S. is definitely going to invade Iraq and when we do we are going to bring democracy and justice to that region, we are going to transform the whole Middle East, and it will be a better place." Well, of course the room erupted in anger because while the Bush Administration was widely assumed to be planning an invasion of Iraq, it had not announced it yet and the President had not yet made his speech to the UN outlining ways Iraq could head it off. Forbes also said, "We're going to go into Iraq because of what happened in 9/11. We can't let Iraq's interference and their help in 9/11 to go unpunished." Again the room erupted, and the attendees were furious the whole rest of the weekend. The whole conference became a discussion of how bad the United States was and why our policies were all wrong.

I pulled Steve Forbes aside at the coffee break and I said, "What are you talking about? There is no evidence linking Saddam Hussein to 9/11." He said, basically, "It doesn't matter. The meaning of 9/11 is that the U.S. is justified in doing whatever we can to prevent ever being hit like that again." I was flabbergasted, really flabbergasted. A week later President Bush went to the United Nations and makes the case for going into Iraq because Iraq's defiance of a long string of UN resolutions calling for weapons inspections. Then, not long after that, Colin Powell made his presentation to the United Nations with all of that evidence about weapons of mass destruction. Even though I'd been so shocked by what Steve Forbes had had to say, I really trusted Colin Powell. I'm a great admirer of his, still am. When he put his personal prestige on the line and made that case, that Saddam Hussein was going after weapons of mass destruction, I believed him.

Q: I believed him too.

HUHTALA: I used Powell's arguments over and over again to explain to Malaysians why we had to go in. If there was any possibility that Saddam was going to unleash biological warfare or nuclear war or anything like that we had to go in. It was true after all that Saddam had gassed his own people. I had all of those arguments and I believed in them. I tell you, when that fell apart, when it became evident after the invasion that there were no weapons found, I had a lot of problems with that myself and so did my staff. We spoke frankly about it inside the embassy. We maintained the U.S. Government line outside of course, as you have to do, but I was not comfortable with it. At that point I was getting a lot of reaction from Malaysians along the line of, "We like you very much, Ambassador, but we really hate your President. Don't you really feel differently?" They were probing, they were trying to get me to say publicly that I disagreed. No ambassador is ever going to say that, and I of course did not do so.

Finally, in 2004, the Abu Ghraib scandal broke, which was I found profoundly shocking. When photographs turned up in the press of American troops humiliating and torturing Iraqi prisoners and leading them on leashes I was just horrified. I braced myself for really vitriolic attacks but the odd thing was, none came. This was March of 2004, I was in my final months in office there and I think my Malaysian contacts and friends had just decided that there was no point even talking to me about it. That was really disheartening.

Q: Did anything come up? We tend to focus, and maybe where you were being connected to the Muslim world, was completely on Iraq and Afghanistan but you know we were doing other things particularly in the early part of the Bush administration by sort of disregarding our NATO allies as not agreeing to international court jurisdiction and anti-missile and things. There is a general sort of we can do it alone feeling. Maybe you could say the Bush one administration now we're only a year into the Bush two administration but there is an earth change.

HUHTALA: But you know what, I saw some of those tendencies in the Clinton Administration too. I remember Madeline Albright getting up and saying that we were the "indispensable nation." I thought comments like that were really arrogant and not helpful at all. This has been I think a straight-line trend in American foreign policy since World War II, which you don't really notice unless you're living and working overseas. You don't see how arrogant we are becoming, how careless of the thoughts and opinions of the rest of the world. That is a most unfortunate trend. I have always seen a big part of my role as a diplomat based overseas to constantly reflect back to Washington what people are thinking, how they are reacting to us. Give them a reality check. I don't know how many times the message has gotten through, frankly, but I tried.

I have to talk too about the security situation there. During the time I was in Malaysia we found out about the existence of an off shoot or a brother organization to Al Qaeda named Jemaah Islamiya (JI). Actually it had been formed in Malaysia among Indonesian radicals who had fled Indonesia and were living in Malaysia. They also had training camps in southern Philippines. They were carrying out terrorist attacks, starting with of the nightclubs in Bali in October 2002. Then there was a bombing of the J.W. Marriott Hotel in Jakarta and then a little bit later at the Australian embassy in Jakarta and then another bombing in Bali.

We were very, very concerned about that because we knew that JI was present in at least four countries in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia. In fact the Malaysians arrested the first 15 or so members. It was very shocking because these were not unemployed rebel rousers, they were college professors. They were employees of multi-national corporations. They were educated people who were involved in this. We knew that we had a very serious threat to our embassy and to our presence there in Malaysia.

On the one-year anniversary of 9/11 we received a specific and alarming threat of a potential truck bomb being aimed at my embassy. My regional security officer called the chief of police that morning of September 10. He told the police, "We need more protection here." Only he didn't get through to the chief directly, he was working through channels. Nothing happened, nothing happened. So about three o'clock in the afternoon I said, "All right, I will call the chief of police myself." I had met him, of course. I got right through to him and told him about our problem. "Oh Ambassador, really? I didn't know that," he said. "We'll send somebody over right away. Of course, we want to protect you." But at five o'clock there was still nobody there. So I said, "That's it. We close the embassy." That got their attention. The embassy stayed closed for four or five days. When we reopened we had armed guards from the police, and we have them to this day as far as I know. We also got them to close off a lane of traffic because the Embassy faces one of the major thoroughfares in downtown Kuala Lumpur. We just were not secure. To live under this constant threat of attack was worrisome, to put it mildly. Because I was a high profile ambassador and a woman, I judged it was really important to have a bodyguard. (The male ambassador in Bangkok had a bodyguard.) I ask for permission to have one in Kuala Lumpur. It took a long time to get Washington's approval, actually. They were not going to spring for it, but we finally worked something out.

Q: How did that work out?

HUHTALA: In the short term, while Washington was making up its mind, we had a big, burly Indian guard on our own staff serve as my bodyguard. He was great. But Washington said, "No, that's not allowed. You can't do that. It has to be someone from the local police." We finally got the agreement of the police. They didn't want to give it at first because they said if they provided a bodyguard to the American Ambassador they would have to give one to every other ambassador in town. That's nonsense. Nobody is as prominent ever as the American Ambassador. And I really felt that being a woman I had a bulls-eye on my head; it's the down side of all that helpful media attention. The Malaysian police finally agreed to assign bodyguards to me. It was a hassle, of course; I didn't enjoy having a bodyguard. But I felt it was important.

Q: No, no, nobody likes these guys hanging around.

HUHTALA: Exactly. I couldn't go anywhere without him and I also had the armored vehicle. Actually, all this took a bigger toll on my husband than on me because he was worried about me. We both found when we finished that assignment and came back here suddenly we were sleeping a whole lot better.

Q: How did you find American firms treated there? What was sort of the American presence there?

HUHTALA: They had a very good experience. In '72 Andy Grove of Intel came to Penang in Malaysia and set up his first overseas operation for Intel. They're there to this day along with Compaq and Dell and Motorola and all the big names.

Q: These are big electronic firms.

HUHTALA: Huge electronics and computers, IT firms. We also had heavy investment in the resource sector, oil and gas. GE was there in a very big way. Our American companies are so beloved there. I was so proud of them. They almost had no ex-pat managers, maybe one ex-pat per company. It was all run by local staff. Again, a lot of them were Chinese. There also were Malays and Indians. Our companies were hiring, promoting and training employees based on merit and not based on who your connections were, so they had a very happy workforce. I toured many factories while I was there. They were good operators and they always had projects to benefit the local community, like school lunch programs or school building or whatever. There was a lot of that kind of thing going on. They were very much appreciated.

Q: Was there any, we'd gone through a period of maybe a decade before or so of the Nike thing and where there was concern over basically exploiting the.

HUHTALA: No, we had nothing like that, absolutely not. Our companies always paid the going wage. One of the things that the employees really appreciated was the amount of training they got. You come in just to put widgets together but pretty soon you're learning a lot of other skills. Ours were the only companies that had a high proportion of women in the executive offices. When I would meet with the whole board of directors there would often be a couple of women in the room as well, serving in jobs like Director of Human Resources.

Q: You talk about the government controlling sources but with the Internet for example you were there, the Internet was in full bloom by then. How about the average Malays or Malaysian of whatever stripe, could they sit down and tickle the keys or have news from everywhere?

HUHTALA: Yes, increasingly they could. In fact they even had some wi-fi spots in downtown Kuala Lumpur.

Q: Wi-fi meaning?

HUHTALA: Wireless internet. Some of the coffee shops, Starbucks and others, you could just take your laptop and get online using a wireless connection. Remember a lot of that equipment was manufactured in Malaysia, so it was readily available. Dell was the biggest maker of laptops in the world, and all of its laptop computers were made in Malaysia. It was pretty pervasive.

Q: Were you seeing this having an impact on how the government could operate?

HUHTALA: Yes, sure. It always was a place just swarming with rumors, and now a lot of the rumors were being put into to e-mails. It's a more efficient way of getting the word out. Also they were very big into the text messaging on their cell phones, as is true in most of Southeast Asia, so a lot of rumors went around that way. That made it harder for the government to control information.

Q: Was America still, I mean you have the two things, the official thing and all that and you have people watching American TV or films and all this, were the younger generation pretty well plugged into what was happening?

HUHTALA: Like in many places around the world the American movies and television shows that got promoted were generally of the more inane or violent nature. It was hard for the really good films to get out. We had a cable TV operation owned by a Malaysian crony of the PM's. It had HBO and Cinemax, and there were also American movies that played in the local theatres, but not always the really good movies. I remember, there was a lot of censorship there. "Sex and the City" would show on HBO but only after 11 o'clock at night, and it would still be blacked out occasionally in places. If you remember that movie, "American Beauty," that came out a few years ago, a complex film with scenes hinting at incest and homosexuality. They cut it so much that when it ran on HBO it only lasted about 45 minutes. It was ridiculous. I couldn't believe how fast that thing went by!

Q: What about NGOs, were there many NGOs?

HUHTALA: There were some. Not as many as in Thailand, and they were under a tighter leash. The human rights NGOs had a hard time doing anything. There was a UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees) office there and they were frequently squeezed by the government. It was hard for them to operate freely. There was one very bold woman named Zainah Anwar, U.S. educated and well plugged-in. She ran a terrific NGO called Sisters in Islam. It not only provided protection and help for women but it also was engaged in very interesting intellectual work. She took apart a lot of the assertions that people were making about Islam and proved them wrong by quoting the Koran. She showed, for example, that in the Koran it never said that women had to cover their heads; it just said Mohammed's wives should cover their heads. She kept pointing out things like that that were being used to keep women down in that society. She got a mixed reaction, of course. That was very interesting.

Q: What about relationships that you would think of, Thailand, Indonesia and I suppose Brunei and Singapore? How did they get along?

HUHTALA: Relatively well. Brunei is a sultanate that should have been in the Malay federation but never opted in. I noticed when the new Malaysian king was crowned in 2002, the Sultan of Brunei attended the ceremonies with the Sultans of Johor, Negeri Sembilan, and Selangor. He was just part of the family in a way.

There was a lot of tension between Singapore and Malaysia, a lot of built-in rivalry there. Some of it went back to hard feelings about the separation in '63 and some of it was based on economic competition. The fact that the Singaporeans were much more willing to cooperate with the U.S. militarily than Malaysians didn't help either. Singapore built a whole new dock capable of handling a U.S. carrier battle group, for instance.

Q: Basically taking over from the Philippines.

HUHTALA: Not to that extent, but in certain ways it is and we have a US Navy logistical base there as well. Singapore's economy is 100% trade-based; it's a city-state and they have an agricultural sector. Malaysia is much more diversified. Malaysia typically does a little better than Singapore. But Singapore negotiated a bilateral free trade agreement with the United States which got Malaysia all upset. Now they're talking about eventually having one with us as well. For years the two countries have been haggling about building a new connection between them to replace the aging causeway. The Malaysians wanted a high arched bridge so that container ships could pass under it and dock at the new Malaysian port on the coast facing Singapore; the Singaporeans would not agree. At one point Malaysia said it would build a high bridge on its own, spanning half the strait, which could swoop down and connect to a low causeway on the Singaporean side of the water if necessary!

Q: Did they play much of a role in ASEAN and all that?

HUHTALA: Yes, they did. As a founding member Malaysia was one of the leaders of ASEAN. The prime minister and others spoke out very courageously against what was going on in Burma. Prime Minister Mahathir made an official visit to Burma while I was there and had hoped meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, but the Burmese authorities did not allow it. He was quite upset about that. Again, he was seen as a kind of cantankerous and difficult leader in the region but a leader nevertheless. The huge economic success that Malaysia had experienced in the previous 40 years gave him a lot of credibility. A lot of countries would like to do as well as Malaysia. It had a GDP of I think \$4,000 per capita, one of the highest in the region, and a very high growth rate. It was doing very well.

Q: How did you find they were doing technologically wise? Were they developing MIT's or Cal Techs or that equivalent?

HUHTALA: No. Education was a problem because they did not have really freedom of free thought, freedom of exploration. They didn't have the kind of intellectual freedom that you need in order to produce first-rate scientists, for instance. Of course the universities were mostly Malay. By the time I got there education, even down to the primary and secondary level was very specialized. Chinese kids went to Chinese school, Indian kids went to Tamil school, Malays went to Malay school. When they got to high school they were suppose to mix it up but by that time all their friends were members of their own racial group so they failed to integrate with others. It was not very healthy.

Q: Indians were Tamil?

HUHTALA: Mostly they were Tamil. So that was not healthy. They lifted the racial restrictions on university places while I was there so it was no longer impossible for bright Chinese kids to get into university. The authorities said all students were going to be getting in based on merit, but I wasn't there long enough to see it really pan out.

Q: Of course you have something that happened in California where Berkley is turned into a Chinese university by the Chinese Americans.

HUHTALA: Although they said the university admissions were going to be based just on merit very few additional Chinese got in. This is related to a big problem on our side. One of the biggest challenges that we faced was U.S. visa policies in the wake of 9/11. Right after, the attacks, in November of 2001, the State Dept. put new procedures in place requiring special clearances for people who came from a list of 20 or so countries. They all happened to be Muslim countries, and Malaysia was on the list. We were supposed to request special clearances from Washington for each and every visa. In the past, special clearance requests were processed in such a way that if the post hadn't heard back from Washington within three weeks it was OK to issue. But this time they quickly got backlogged in Washington and told us we could not issue until we got positive authorization.

By spring and summer of 2003 we had backlogs of thousands and thousands of student visas, many of them Chinese-Malaysian kids bound for places like Harvard and Yale, who could not get their visas. They qualified in every other respect, but they didn't have those special clearances in time. It was a train wreck. This shows you how much lingering admiration for the United States was still there. People wanted to send their kids to school in the United States. There also was a Malaysian government scholarship program for Malay kids who had been selected at the age of 13 and carefully nurtured and brought through their educational system so that they would be ready for America's best universities. Those people weren't getting their visas on time.

I was called in by several government ministers to explain the situation. They felt Malaysians were being unfairly treated, that they were all under suspicion of being terrorists. The public relations impact was disastrous, and it was very hard to call Washington's attention to the issue. The same thing was happening throughout the Muslim world, but the effects were really bad in Malaysia because we had traditionally had such a high volume of student visas and such low refusal rates.

I was one of the first ambassadors who raised the alarm. I managed to do it when Secretary Powell made an official visit in the summer of 2003. One of the perks of being an ambassador is riding in the car with the Secretary en route to official meetings. I took that opportunity to tell him about our visa train wreck, and he promised to look into it. That led to the eventual solution back in Washington. It took about six months to resolve because it had to do with interagency communications. At one point clearance requests had been going from State to the CIA, which didn't have time to answer the mail. That was discontinued, but the FBI still had to clear on these individuals and letting more foreigners into the country was not their highest priority, shall we say. Finally Maura Harty, the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs in State worked with her opposite number in the FBI to find a good effective way to get these things done and to answer the mail. But in the meantime, it was a public relations nightmare out at post.

Q: Oh yeah, and well it was not only that, but it was a financial nightmare for the universities. Also quite frankly, probably looking at this, not one of, but maybe the greatest weapon we've had and that is the fact that the United States is an absorptive country for people coming. They love it when they come.

HUHTALA: Really it's a battle of ideas, it always is, and one of the best ways to propagate your ideas is to get people to study on your soil.

Q: And take a look at it.

HUHTALA: Exactly, and dispel the myths and preconceptions that they've grown up with. So the visa stoppage was very counter productive.

Q: We were really shooting ourselves in the foot. How about China? What sort of a role did China play at that time?

HUHTALA: China, at this point, was engaged on a massive charm offensive throughout Southeast Asia. That included lots of high-level visits, which we just could not match. During my tenure the Secretary of State visited one time. The last President of the United States to visit Malaysia was Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s. On the other hand, the president of China and their prime minister travelled all the time. Asians love these official visits. It really gives face and status to all concerned. So China was doing that. They were also pouring money in, arranging exchanges, conferences, etc. They were giving their own people passports and there were a huge number of Chinese tourists now coming into Southeast Asia and pumping a lot of money into the economies. A lot of our ambassadors were concerned that we were losing the PR battle to China during this period; I tended to agree.

Q: Did you have Malaysian hands, were Malaysian and Indonesian similar or the same language?

HUHTALA: The languages are very similar. Several of the people in my embassy had served in Indonesia so they were able to convert their Indonesian into Malaysian pretty easily. But the countries are quite different actually. It's funny, they're both Muslim but Malaysia was much more closed-minded, following prescribed trains of thought, whereas in Indonesia you had real creative, intellectual discussion and argument. Of course the Indonesian experience had been completely different. It had been relieved of its dictatorship in 1998 and it was developing into a real democracy, but the process was rather chaotic.

Q: What about a change in government while you were there? How did that come about and what did it mean?

HUHTALA: Prime Minister Mahathir shocked the nation at an UMNO party convention in June 2002, when he told them at the end of their big annual meeting that he was going to resign. All the cabinet members and party leaders were thunderstruck, as they'd had no advance warning. He just got up to the podium and said, "I've decided to resign," and started to cry. Party leaders rushed the podium and dragged him away into another room and got him to reconsider because, you know, all their rice bowls were in his hands. Eventually he returned to the podium and announced that he still intended to retire, but only after a transition period of 15 months. Have you ever heard of such a long transition period? During that time the deputy prime minister, Abdullah Badawi, was in line to become the next prime minister but he had to mind his p's and q's very carefully. He could never say anything controversial, never give any hint that he would do things differently from the old man. It was a very strange period.

Q: Were you there during that?

HUHTALA: I was, I was there that whole time.

Q: Well who did you see?

HUHTALA: Everyone stayed in place. All the ministers kept their portfolios. I would go see the deputy prime minister sometimes in his capacity as minister of the interior, responsible for counter terrorism, and I would take visitors to see him as well. It was a period of great tension in the period leading up to the changeover. Finally on October 31, 2003, they had an official ceremony in which Mahathir stepped down and Abdullah was sworn in. We were watching it on television in my office and we broke out the champagne. All the American embassy employees came up and shared a toast. (I didn't want to offend the Malaysians on our staff, so we didn't tell them about it.) Then we quickly had to hide all the glasses because the embassy children were coming around to Trick or Treat.

But just before this, Mahathir threw a final bomb in the tent before leaving. Malaysia had become chair of the Organization of Islamic Conference, the OIC. (Malaysia also was chair of the Non-Aligned Movement that year.) Mahathir used these positions to continue his vilification of the U.S. and the West. In February 2003 when Malaysia hosted a summit meeting of NAM leaders, Mahathir gave a blistering speech accusing the United States of trying to conquer the world. It was dreadful. So were bracing ourselves for the OIC plenary meeting in mid-October. Sure enough, this time he made a speech and said the Jews were trying to rule the world and the United States was helping them. And all the people in power in the United States were Jews. It was just dreadful anti-Semitic crap. This caused huge anger in this country and around the world. On that note, he left office.

His poor successor, Abdullah Badawi, had to figure out some way to counteract that. In fact, he is a very different type of person, much more tolerant and less doctrinaire. He immediately began talking about religious tolerance and reaching out to other groups. He could not directly repudiate Mahathir, but he sent a clear signal that things were going to be different.

Badawi has a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural background. He is a Malay born in Malaysia but his mother was a Muslim from China. His wife Endon (who passed away earlier this year), was half Japanese and half Malay. And he comes from the island of Penang, which is the only state in Malaysia that has a Chinese majority population and a Chinese chief minister; it's also where a huge amount of American investment is located. Unlike Mahathir, Badawi is also a religious scholar, having studied Islam formally at university; this gave him greater confidence and authority when dealing with the Islamic opposition party. So he had a lot of the right instincts from the beginning. But asserted his own influence and put his own touch on politics rather tentatively, and was perceived to be weak because he was not as ruthless as his predecessor. Meanwhile Mahathir was complaining more and more loudly from the side; it was clear he was furious that his successor wasn't following his line anymore.

Q: What happened to the former deputy prime minister? Is he still in jail?

HUHTALA: Actually he was released, but not until I got back to Washington. A Malaysian court finally found its scruples, its gumption, and granted the appeal of one of his two convictions. Remember he had undergone two trials, with consecutive sentences. He had served the first sentence and was beginning the second sentence when the appeal came through. This never would have happened while Mahathir was in office. It was widely interpreted that Badawi had given a signal that it would be okay to release him, especially since Anwar badly needed a back operation following the physical abuse he suffered in prison. He refused treatment before his release because he didn't want to go under the knife of any surgeon in Malaysia. After his release he went to Germany for his operation.

Q: What was happening, on Borneo , was that a different cast or how did things?

HUHTALA: Sabah and Sarawak , the two states on the island of Borneo, are quite different from the states on the peninsula. They are not majority Malay, and not even majority Muslims. I think the mix there is about a third Muslim, a third Christian, a third other religions. There are a lot of Chinese there and a lot of indigenous people.

Q: Dayaks?

HUHTALA: Dayaks, yes. I loved going there because it was less intellectually oppressive. People were freer to speak their minds. We had a few American investments there. And there were many beautiful places for eco-tourism. We had some fabulous trips. The U.S. had a security warning, a travel advisory in place for the northeastern part of Sabah because in the year 2000 or 2001, (while I was still in Bangkok) some Muslim terrorists from the Abu Sayaff Group had come down from the Philippines and raided a resort on Easter Sunday; they kidnapped a bunch of tourists, including several Americans. So it was not really safe in that area. This was a point of friction. The Malaysians got upset every year when we renewed our travel advisory. But conditions did not warrant lifting it.

Q: What about the Philippines? Did they play any role there at all?

HUHTALA: They did in Sabah. There were a lot of Philippine workers there, most of them illegally. Also one of the Filipino Sultans, the Sultan of Sulu, had an ancestral claim to Sabah which he would not renounce. For this reason the Malaysians refused permission for a Philippine Consulate in Sabah, which would have been helpful.

Q: Brunei, did that play any role or did they just sit back and count their money?

HUHTALA: They had a dispute going with the Malaysians over some gas in the South China Sea, but basically relations were fine.

Q: With Indonesia the whole issue was "Konfrontasi"?

HUHTALA: That was 30 years earlier.

Q: So I mean there were no particular repercussions in the matter?

HUHTALA: Indonesia was of course and still is, in a period of consolidation after the fall of Suharto, and they were still kind of inwardly focused. Indonesia had been the natural leader of ASEAN but had not played that role since Suharto fell. Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin thought that maybe he could play that role, but he was not universally accepted. It hasn't really been resolved yet.

Q: Was Vietnam at all powerful, could you see it?

HUHTALA: It was an emerging power within ASEAN and seen as such. Vietnam's relations with Malaysia were quite correct. They exchanged ambassadors and tourists. It wasn't yet a very substantial relationship; there wasn't a lot of investment.

Q: You and your embassy staff, how was living in Malaysia?

HUHTALA: It was a beautiful place to live in. Everyone below the level of political counsellor loved it. Those of us who had to deal with the ministries experienced a lot of frustration, particularly with officials from the ministry of foreign affairs. They're notoriously difficult to deal with.

Q: Is it they're difficult or is it just that they're not very apt?

HUHTALA: It's both. They're not the swiftest bureaucrats in the world, but also they have a real chip on their shoulder towards the United States. We had silly things happening, for example, the director general who covers relations with the United States wouldn't deal with our political counsellor. He thought his rank was too high, he should really only talk to the ambassador. Well I usually talked to his superiors so occasionally he would deal with the DCM. I mean, it was just silly, silly stuff like that. But the living was great. We had a wonderful school, good shopping. We were right near the Petronas Towers and at the base of those twin towers is a big shopping mall and also a beautiful philharmonic hall.

Q: What about those twin towers? Are they the tallest building in the world?

HUHTALA: They were while I was there, yes. They've been overtaken now.

Q: Weren't people nervous about them being a target for terrorism?

HUHTALA: Yes, in fact they had a bomb scare right after 9/11 and people walked down 40 flights to evacuate. They had pretty tight security there. I was up to the top several times. Where the bridge is you can get tickets, anybody can, and go up and take a look there. Through our police contacts I once had a chance to go to the very, very top, which is awesome. From there you can see the entire valley, it's quite beautiful, but also you're up so high you can see and feel the towers swaying. It's a little bit unnerving.

Q: Thanks.

HUHTALA: Yeah, exactly.

Q: Like one of those things that, we're going to let you go into our mine or something like that.

HUHTALA: I know, I don't care to go down into mines. We did have one big issue with the Malaysians in my last six months. This was very unfortunate. The new Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, had a son who was a partner in a manufacturing company called Scope. They produced precision industrial drilling equipment. Unbeknownst to the prime minister (and probably unbeknownst to the son), the factory was also producing centrifuge parts for nuclear proliferation. This was discovered by the United States when we seized a ship on the shores of Italy, which was tied directly to the Libyan nuclear program. It also had been supported by A. Q. Khan, the notorious Pakistani proliferators. I believed what happened was that a Sri Lankan individual named B.S. Tahir, married to a Malaysian, was active in the company and he's the one who had apparently introduced the centrifuge designs. I don't think that the son of the prime minister had anything to do with it or even knew about it. In typical Malaysian fashion he was there because of his father's position.

When this was discovered and became public, a big scandal ensued. We found out that Malaysia had no system of export control which might have caught that kind of thing in a timely fashion. It became a really, really difficult issue. I came back to Washington for consultation about it. We pressed the Badawi government very hard to arrest the Sri Lankan, Tahir, and to cooperate with authorities in tracing the Khan network's activities. That was one thing we wanted them to do, and they eventually did. The other thing was they need to do was to put in place a system of export controls, which the folks in the foreign affairs ministry and the trade ministry have always viewed as a foreign plot to inhibit trade, to keep them from prospering. I kept making the argument that this would protect them from further embarrassments like this; of course Malaysia didn't want to be known as a nuclear proliferator. If they were seen to be such that would be the end of all kinds of contracts and American investment, and there were serious sanctions for that kind of thing. By the time I left post they were beginning slowly to come around to the realization that they were going to have to go down that path. We were offering training to get them started. I told them, "It's a very complex subject, our own companies have a lot of difficulty with it, but we have a lot of experience here, we can show you how this is done." When I left they were at least thinking about it seriously.

Q: Was this pronounced, this problem in the Malay press?

HUHTALA: It did finally come out in the press. At first it was all very, very secretive but then it all got leaked.

Q: Is there anything else we should discuss?

HUHTALA: We had a very interesting consular case. An American woman came to the embassy and told us her ex-husband, a Saudi, was keeping her children against their will in Saudi Arabia, but the family planned to come to Malaysia for vacation. She asked our help in getting her children (of whom she had custody according to a U.S. court) away from their father and back to the U.S. This was a very delicate issue, of course, but we agreed to do whatever we could. We contacted Washington and confirmed her story, then worked out a way for her to bring her kids to the embassy for safety. As it turned out, only one child, a 16-year-old daughter, agreed to leave with her. The two came to the embassy at night, and I witnessed a very touching reunion between mother and daughter who had not seen each other for five years. We issued the daughter a passport, and used an embassy driver to take them down to Singapore. The consular officer persuaded the Malaysian border guard to let the couple cross even though the daughter's passport lacked an entry stamp, and our colleagues on the other side were waiting with a van to take them to the airport. They flew back to the U.S. that very morning.

I mention this because the issue of international child abduction has gained tremendous attention in recent years, and occasionally parents accuse the U.S. Government of being insensitive to their plight. In this case we went to great lengths to reunite this family, and I was very proud of our staff for their efforts.

Also, there were developments on the personal front. Eino was once again spending most of his time with me at post, which was a great help. (As ambassador, you can be very alone and you really need some moral support!) In September 2002 we returned to the U.S. on R&R and had the great joy of being present when our daughter Karen gave birth to her first child, Allison.

But on October 25, 2002, when we were back at post, we received notification that our son Jorma was missing in action. A graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, Jorma was living his lifelong dream as a fighter pilot. During training exercises at Hill AFB in Utah, his F-16 became involved in a mid-air collision. We returned immediately to the U.S. for his memorial service at Hill, funeral in Reston and burial at Arlington National Cemetery.

It was a huge tragedy for us. I was very touched to see a big bus from the State Dept. pull up for the burial service; we deeply appreciated the support of our colleagues and friends. And many, many Malaysians from all walks of life, including Mahathir and other leaders, expressed their condolences as well.

I went back to post to finish my assignment. Though it was difficult at first, it never occurred to me to request curtailment. I later found out, though, that the Department leadership was prepared to grant a curtailment if I wanted one.

Q After Malaysia you retired?

HUHTALA: No, I came back in 2004 to be a Deputy Assistant Secretary in EAP.

Q: Oh, how long were you in that?

HUHTALA: Just a year. There's a story there too.

Q: Do we have time for that?

HUHTALA: Sure, yeah let's do that.

Q: Okay, what?

HUHTALA: Jim Kelly was the Assistant Secretary. He very much wanted me to come back and replace Matt Daley as the DAS for Southeast Asia. I loved that portfolio, covering so many countries that I had worked on before. So I came back to Washington do that. I started in July of last year, 2004 and we had a number of very interesting issues. There was the development of democracy in Indonesia, they had an election, and an impressive new president (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono) came in. We were following Thaksin's crack down in Thailand, the war on drugs. We were working on a visit for the Vietnamese prime minister, the first such visit to Washington. I was busy managing a lot of issues, travelling to the region and making speeches.

Then on December 26 the Asian tsunami struck. The whole EAP Bureau worked around the clock from that day on to coordinate the USG response and facilitate various trips out there. Colin Powell set out immediately to visit the region, so we put together a briefing book for him on a crash basis. At the same time the State Dept. had a taskforce going, we were working to put together assistance, and to get the U.S. military engaged.

The province of Aceh in Indonesia was absolutely devastated. It was just scraped clean, the town of Bandar Aceh on the coast was obliterated. The resort area of Phuket in Thailand was also very badly hit. The third area that was hit hard was Sri Lanka, along with several other countries. For weeks we worked very intensely under the leadership of the Under Secretary for Political Affairs Mark Grossman to confront this crisis.

Q: What about our response, did we have military forces close by that we could use?

HUHTALA: We had a carrier battle group, the USS Lincoln, that was in liberty in Hong Kong on the day the tsunami struck. It was on its way home from the Persian Gulf. Admiral Fargo, the Commander of Pacific Forces, turned them around that very day, the day of the tsunami and they began steaming for Indonesia. They got there by the January 1st and began providing assistance. The U.S. was, by any measure, the first nation to respond. We also had a Marine battle group, the Belleau Woods, that was on its way to the Persian Gulf that was diverted and sent to Aceh. Those two battle groups did an absolutely fabulous job saving lives. In Aceh there was no clean water, no food, no medical facilities; the military provided all of that to survivors. We also brought a hospital ship, the USS Mercy, which arrived about a month after. But the crucial thing is that the first responders did was to bring in bladders of clean water and to send their helicopters out for search and rescue because there were a lot of people trapped in isolated areas. The coast road had been destroyed. They plucked them out and brought them to safety. It was very, very impressive. Of course we immediately began getting food out there as well.

I got to see it twice. Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, went out to visit in February and I went along on that trip. He was a former ambassador to Indonesia and was very deeply concerned about the tragedy; he also wanted to observe the heavy military involvement in the relief effort. Then I returned in early May when Bob Zoellick, who was now Deputy Secretary of State, went out. I saw in the two and a half months interval there there had been some progress in cleaning the debris and very tentative attempts at rebuilding. But it was clear that the region was going to take a generation at least to recover.

Q: First place, were you able to detach officers, Foreign Service officers to go in with the military?

HUHTALA: We didn't need to do that. We had a consulate in Medan, not far from the scene, so we had a presence already. AID was soon present in a very massive way but they didn't have to be assigned to the military or anything. They coordinated with the military very well. There were also a lot of other nations providing assistance. That first time we landed on the airport at Bandar Aceh, it was like a scene out of "Apocalypse Now." It was crazy. We arrived on a C-130 from Thailand was loaded with food, really well supplied. The aircraft parked in the middle of a landing strip and we got out. My God, there's a helicopter zooming by! And here there are people coming over to greet Wolfowitz, right under the shadow of the plane. Somebody else has the back door open and they're taking out relief supplies; here comes another plane landing from some Dutch NGO. It was chaotic, dangerous and hotter than hell. But by golly, they did fabulous work.

Q: Did you see any change coming in Aceh? This revolt had been going on for decades I guess. Was this going to change things or not?

HUHTALA: Eventually it did, very interestingly. The day of the tsunami, which was a Sunday morning, most of the Indonesian police and military forces were in the town along the coast, and many of them were killed instantly. A lot of the guerrilla fighters, the GAM, were up in the hills so they were spared. But that didn't give them a huge advantage because the town, the coastal area, had been their logistical base. One of the elements of uncertainty for our forces going in was that this was an insurgent area, we didn't know if it was really safe to go in there. It developed that the GAM had been hurt pretty badly too. They lost family and they lost support. A few months after the tsunami, the first peace talks between GAM and the Indonesian government took place in Finland, mediated by a former president of Finland. The Indonesian government, the newly elected democratic government, sent a cabinet-level delegation to participate in the talks. The result has been a peace agreement, which was an unexpected and beautiful thing. Out of all of this chaos and destruction there was at least one very positive result.

We also were able to get Congressional approval for a plan to resume IMET training for Indonesia, which had been blocked for many years because of the human rights abuses there. The new Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and the outgoing secretary, Colin Powell, both supported it. After we did a lot of due diligence with the Congress, Secretary Rice was able to make the certification that was necessary. This made tremendous sense. When you have a rogue military they're not going to get any better if you don't train them, if you don't work with them. It's one of these sanctions that has never made a lot of sense in my mind. With the appropriate vetting in place, we have now resumed training the Indonesian forces.

Q: Were there any other developments there, the Indo-China complex, how were they in this period?

HUHTALA: The Indo-China complex?

Q: I mean Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

HUHTALA: It was a continuation of the previous trends that I have described. With Vietnam we had been forced to call them a "country of particular concern" in our religious freedom report, which was the first time that we had had to do a negative thing like that during the normalization process. Being designated a CPC can involve certain sanctions. Because we were in the process of negotiating this first-ever visit by the Vietnamese prime minister, it was very delicate. We eventually worked out a way to get them to agree to improve their performance on religious freedom under a so-called binding agreement, which is also provided for in the legislation as an alternative to sanctions. Having gone through such a laborious process to lift all of the sanctions resulting from the Vietnam war, nobody wanted to be back in the business of imposing sanctions on Vietnam. Nevertheless there are real problems with religious freedom there, they do have to be addressed, and they are being addressed. Although I saw that they were again named a CPC again this year. I guess they are not out of the woods yet.

Q: Did you feel that Vietnam particularly was beginning to feel the effects of actuarial tables getting rid some of the old guard?

HUHTALA: No, they are still trying to pursue economic liberalization without political liberalization. But what I saw in my visits there (I visited a couple of times in my last year) was that the political leaders are becoming a little bit irrelevant. With the bilateral trade agreement in force and American and foreign investment coming into Vietnam, there is a certain dynamic that is developing there that will eventually make that kind of political system obsolete. It will probably take another generation.

Q: Again, instant communications are in place.

HUHTALA: Sure. They've got the Internet, they've got cable TV. We're doing the right thing there; we're bringing a lot of their young people for education in the United States and then sending them back. Again, they remain very industrious, very intelligent people.

Cambodia is still muddling along, doing very badly politically; it's kind of a frustrating place.

Q: And Laos?

HUHTALA: Laos is much the same, and things have deteriorated a lot in Burma. They again have "the Lady" (Aung San Suu Kyi) under detention and I don't see a lot of future there. We were trying, while I was in that job, to get ASEAN to put more pressure on Burma because they rotate their chairmanship alphabetically and Burma is due to take chairmanship under their new name Myanmar, in the near future. They were due to become chairman in 2006 so we were making the point that if they had an ASEAN meeting in Rangoon and the situation there was still as bad as it is now with regards to human rights, they should not expect the Secretary of State to attend that meeting. This is something that the ASEAN countries were taking on board. As I left that job they were working out some kind of an arrangement for Burma to say that it was too busy to do it this year because it had its own national convention going and was getting a new constitution in place, so another country could take its place as chair. Clearly the other countries in ASEAN were putting pressure on them.

Q: I realize you're down the line a bit but in the State Department did you pick up the feeling, you'd been out there during basically the second Bush first term, Bush two first term, but the second term with Condoleezza Rice coming and all was there any sort of feeling, okay this hasn't been the greatest four years but now let's get back more in line or not?

HUHTALA: There was a lot of apprehension in the State Department when Powell left and Rice came in, for several reasons. Not the least of which was that it was felt that Powell had kind of lost out in the policy debates, that he had been trumped many times by Rice and Rumsfeld and that the policy approaches that our Building favored were discredited. By appointing his National Security Advisor to be Secretary of State, we felt the President intended to impose greater control on us. I think that is what may have happened. Most of this would relate to the Middle East, and I didn't work on that area, but it would affect other issues as well. With regard to East Asia we've had this ongoing crisis with North Korea and the effort to get the Six-Party Talks going. Jim Kelly had never been able to get much traction there, partly because he was not allowed to really negotiate with the North Koreans. Now with Rice in control the new Assistant Secretary has been given that authority, so he's made a little bit more progress. It's not very fair to Jim Kelly really, he had his hands tied. There has been a difference in approach.

With regard to the Building, morale was terrible because one thing that Powell and Armitage had done was to really think about the welfare of the troops, the people who work there. They had instituted all kinds of changes and reforms. Things as small as putting a day care center out here at FSI, which had been wanted for many, many years, and as major as reaching out and talking to people and seeking our opinions. I was able to talk to Armitage all the time and I saw the Secretary on a number of occasions too. He was always very approachable, very open. That changed dramatically when the new team came in. In fact Bob Zoellick is a disaster with regard to managing people. He treats his staff and people in the Building pretty badly; he is very autocratic and not at all supportive. You only need a couple of incidents like this in a place like State before the word gets out through the whole building. In fact, it has been like a return to the Jim Baker years, when the career service was disdained and sidelined. It now appears that the spirit of collegiality that we enjoyed during the Powell years was just a blip, it's not the same anymore. It's really too bad.

In EAP the new Assistant Secretary was Christopher Hill, who had been ambassador to South Korea for just under a year. Before that he had spent most of his career in European affairs. He decided that he wanted to change out all the DAS's and bring in people that he knew, so he asked each of us to leave. He did not seem concerned about the expertise the Bureau would lose. The DAS for China had been a political appointee, an Armitage protégé; he left anyway to go work with Armitage in the private sector. The other DAS's and I were asked to leave. I left the Bureau in early June 2005.

Q: So you retired.

HUHTALA: I came over to FSI for a few months and then I decided, yes, to retire. I had 33 years, it's been a really good run and now I'm anxious to do other things. I feel a little bit of regret because I really enjoyed working on Southeast Asia and there were a lot of balls in the air. There were a lot of things going on. It was kind of sudden to have to sever that cord. But since I can't go back and work on Southeast Asia and stay active in that area of policy formation it's time for me to think of something else and that's what I'm doing.

Q: What are you thinking of doing?

HUHTALA: I am returning to a longstanding interest in languages. I want to teach English as Second Language at the college level, as a college professor. To do that I need to get a masters degree in linguistics, and I will start working on that next month at George Mason University.

Q: Great. I wish you luck.

HUHTALA: It will keeps me in the international arena in a way, and it will be a lot of fun, I think.

Q: I'm sure it will. Thank you.

End of interview